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The Pleasure is All Ours: Race and Queerness in the *Promised Land*

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The Pleasure is All Ours: Race and Queerness in the *Promised Land*

by

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Dedication

My mentor at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Vicki Mahaffey, said that a piece of writing can be read as a letter to whom it is dedicated. I therefore dedicate this to the three people—besides my committee—whom I most want to read this piece: Cassidy Browning, Rayna Matthews, and Beliza Torres Narvaez.

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Abstract

The Pleasure is All Ours: Race and Queerness in the *Promised Land*

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This paper calls for a queer art and politics that treats identity categories such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class and others as co-constitutional. With the writer's one-man show, *Promised Land: A Radical Queer Revival,* as its central text, this paper describes a performance of co-constitutionality that acknowledges the artist's subordinate and privileged statuses through carnivalesque performance tropes such as humor, open sexuality and audience interaction. The first chapter uses media and performance studies to address the investment in whiteness by heteronormative gay politics and culture. The second chapter explores the creation of a racially constituted queer world in *Promised Land* through the performance and its intertexts. The conclusion offers a notion of performing "the utopian identity" as a means of engaging with and resisting normative hegemony.

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Introduction: Going Gaga for Race and Queerness

There is a half-naked body in the graduate seminar. It's mine. I am standing behind a free-standing cardboard construction painted light blue with white clouds to resemble the sky, with a rectangle cut out of it and a line of black paint running down the middle to a collage of images cut from magazines. Those images have something in common: they are all pictures of white men, either in fashionable clothing or in the never-out-of-style bare chest. Although it may not be clear to the viewer, all pictures have been cut from a single issue of *Out* magazine; even those who are not familiar with the magazine, however, would likely read the current of homoeroticism in the exclusively male images. Above all these ads, however, is the cut-out rectangle, representing (if I have done my job right) a billboard. In this billboard is the only living torso in the piece: mine. Where the photos are slender or athletic, this torso is fat. Where the photos have shaved or hairless chests, this chest is hairy. While every photographed torso still has its head attached, this torso's head is hidden behind the cardboard sky. Nevertheless, there are things that I can do that these photographs can't: I can speak the line "What's wrong with this picture?" I can sing, in this case an adaptation of Lady Gaga's "Just Dance" that declares to the world, "This Anglo-normative regime is trampling my self-esteem! They're getting creepier, these photos in sepia! There's no room for a body like mine!" I can knock down the cardboard edifice and dance, although, in this case, I lose track of my breathing and have to pant the rest of the song. I can enunciate my desires—the chorus of "Need head!" referring as much to my need for a means of thinking through the problems of this world as my desire to receive oral sex—and assure the audience that I

have “a queer family” that nevertheless will “have sex with me” when I want it, and that my desire for the graduate students in front of me is to see them fulfill their own sexual desires and then join up on the frontlines: “Get head! Get some head tonight! Get head! But then pick up the fight!” Most crucially for me as a performer, I can make them laugh—laughter being, perhaps, the best way to know that someone is paying attention—and I can make them cheer.

This thesis is part of my assault—on multiple fronts—against the Anglo-normative regime: it will examine my first one-man show, *Promised Land: A Radical Queer Revival*, which debuted at The New Movement Theater in December 2009. The piece relates the story of my first trip to Ida. As I arrive at Ida, desperate to find other radical queer, cis-gendered men to connect with on intellectual, emotional and sexual levels while getting a heavy dose of culture shock in the rural, radical community, I relate stories of my previous experiences attempting to find a livable, legible life in a larger gay community dominated by looksism, male chauvinism, consumerism, and, lest we forget, racism. Between these two choices, I get over my culture shock and find a place I had been looking for all my life: a place where being a fat, gender-blending queer with radical political convictions is to be welcomed, embraced, and desired. Through both this performance and this essay, I assert the need for a queer art and politics which recognizes that identity categories such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class and many others are not exclusive categories that can be treated as such until they “happen to” intersect on, for

example, queer Latin@[1] bodies like my own. Rather, these categories are co-constitutional, inseparable from one another in a world where any given body has been assigned (or has claimed) a race, a gender, a sexuality, a class level, etc. As such, queer art and politics must enact resistance not against a heteronormativity free from racial, class or other frames, but one that is always already a white heteronormativity, a heteronormativity of a privileged class, an able-bodied normativity, etc. This is not to say that I, as an artist, can address all these identity categories equally in every performance: certainly, as much as the performance in the classroom was a performance of the tribulations of being a queer person of color with a fat body, it is also a performance of male privilege (I can expose my chest in public without fear of legal repercussions), of ability privilege (I can dance), of class and education privilege (I can rhyme "self-esteem" with "Anglo-normative regime"), of cisgender[2] privilege (no one looks at my chest and sees scars or breast tissue that might make them question whether I am a man). However, since I will always perform privilege as well as alterity, I have to resist a performance that relies primarily (or, worse, exclusively) on the staging of suffering and the call for empathy, a call that, as we can see in the fallout of the Proposition 8 vote later in this essay, can reify privilege as well as challenge it, foster antipathy between

[1] "Latin@" resists the notion that the gender-neutral pronoun to describe Latinos and Latinas is "Latino," the male pronoun. Rather, it combines the "o" and the "a" into the "@" symbol which is inherently unpronounceable, although many pronounce it "Latinao." This serves to disrupt the privileging of the male in the Spanish language and also offers a term for those who may choose to not to identify as exclusively male or female.

[2] The term "cisgender" describes an individual who presents and identifies as the gender that they were assigned at birth; being assigned the male gender at birth and presenting as such, I am a cisgender man. This term is used to describe people who are not transgender in a way that resists the more hierarchical implications of "biological" or, worse, "real" man or woman.

minoritarian groups as well as fellowship. Rather, I will make my assault on normativity with tools of pleasure like the ones featured in the performance above: parody (of Lady Gaga and Abercrombie billboards), wit (I think rhyming "creepier" with "sepia" is pretty clever, if I do say so myself), the exposure of flesh (especially the kind that rarely gets put on billboards, except as "before" pictures), DIY aesthetics (cardboard, magazine cut-outs and spray paint make for a cheap and easy set) and ribald sexuality. It is this last tool that I hand to my audience—an audience that includes fat, white, female bodies, and athletic, older, African American, immigrant, female bodies, and slim, white, gay, immigrant, male bodies, and so many others—as I urge them to "get head," to be the recipients of pleasure whether or not normativity says they should, and then to "pick up the fight." Is the fight for me? Is the fight for them? If I have done my work well, the fight is for us.

In this introduction, I will go into further detail on the need to assert co-constitutionality in place of intersectionality, and then move on to a discussion of my performance methodology and, to an extent, my performance genealogy as I offer a critique of the staging of suffering that opens a place for performances that draw upon humor, the queer/DIY/camp strategies of *CampCamp!*—Austin's premier queer open-mike performance venue—and the modalities of Bakhtin's carnival. I will then offer a description of my critical methodology and a breakdown of the chapters of the thesis, offering a diagnosis of the problems for which *Promised Land* is a prescription.

Co-Constitutionality: One House, Many Different Streets

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), a watershed work on the theorization of queer performers of color, Jose Esteban Muñoz draws from Kimberle William Crenshaw's idea of "intersectionality" to name the characteristic of being both queer and a person of color, a term which offers resistance to those "normative accounts of woman that always imply a white feminist subject and equally normativizing accounts of blackness that assume maleness" (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 8). The term is rather humorously geographic: one can imagine that somewhere there's a Queer St. and People of Color Blvd., and we live in a charming and colorful neighborhood at the crossroads. The humor of this image points to the fact that the word intersectionality doesn't quite go far enough: if there are people living in the intersection, then there must also be people living just on Queer St (making them, perhaps, more purely queer). In *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire* (2010), Sandra Soto writes:

> . . . 'intersectionality' is perhaps too spatially rigid and exacting a metaphor to employ when considering the ever dynamic and unending process of subject formation. It seems to me that race, sexuality, and gender are much too complex, unsettled, porous (and I do mean to be wordy here), mutually constitutive, unpredictable, incommensurable, and dynamic, certainly too spatially and temporally contingent, *ever* (even if only for an instant) to travel independently of one another" (Soto 6).

Soto rightly insists that these three categories cannot "travel independently of one another." To do so would require a body that somehow manages to have one and not the other. Nevertheless, the amount of theory and criticism that treats these three mutually constitutive terms as separate entities can—and does—fill libraries. Moreover, the idea that these terms can "travel independently" allows for women, people of color and queers

to deny their racial, gender, and heterosexual privilege when the mood suits them, not to mention class, ability and other kinds of privilege. As I was writing this thesis, a colleague related the story of working as a dramaturg on a play about historical outlaw women in Texas; when she expressed her concern that all of the women portrayed in the piece were white, she was told by the playwright that the play wasn't dealing with gender, not race. That very same week, on the LOGO TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (which will continue to be a site of inquiry for this thesis) the performer Manila Luzon, herself a Filipin@-American, became a figure of some controversy when she won a challenge by portraying an Asian reporter who spoke with a thick accent, transposing her "R"s and "L"s. The judges praised her for this, one judge, Michelle Visage, insisting that it wasn't offensive because, "It's not about race" ("The Queen Who Mopped Xmas"), implying that the queerness of drag moved what was self-evidently a performance of race out of the category of race: Manila may live at the intersection, but her house, or perhaps simply her performance venue, is on Queer St. In each case, an artist is able to shrug off questions of racism merely by asserting that this is about resisting a different form of oppression; one wonders how these artists would react to sexism or homophobia in a piece by an artist of color that insists "It's not about gender."

It is for this reason that I bring in Soto's counter-term to intersectionality—racialized sexuality—not to let it rest easy, but to expand upon it. Soto first turns to *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's insight that, among a wide range of sexual proclivities, "precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now

ubiquitous category of 'sexual orientation'" (Sedgwick 8). Soto asks that we not so much consider the possibility as acknowledge the reality that there is an "equally meaningful place of racial formation and class relations in our sexual lives," and that, in turn, we must examine "the significant role that sexual desires and sexual prohibitions play in racialization" (Soto 1). To exclusively desire members of one's own race or class, or those outside of one's race or class, or even to pretend an ignorance of these valences when choosing sexual or romantic partners is, in each case, a sexual orientation that can be called homo, hetero, or pansexual with as much semantic sense as when those terms are understood along gender binaries (or continuums). In addition, as Soto points out in her work on Cherrie Moraga, the fact that Moraga (along with other queer Latin@ writers) has the "ability to objectify race, to desire it fiercely, only makes her more insistent on her right to it and on its inseparability from herself" (28), a paradox that, along with "the contradictions, shame, aporias, and even self-loathing that underwrite her narrative of outsiderness and homecoming bring into sharper relief the very illogic of racialization and racism" (37). With this potential for deconstruction in mind, this ability for racialized sexuality to throw racial identity into question, I move one step further from Soto's idea of racialized sexuality, and assert the need for a view of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ability and a number of other identity categories that we frequently understand as separate-though-intersecting to instead be recognized as co-constitutional.

I say all this now; the truth is that the image of intersectionality is far more vivid and familiar than co-constitutionality, entirely because treating race and sexuality as

separate things is a far more widespread, ingrained idea than seeing them as inseparable. Moreover, the identity politics movements have insured that our political struggles are treated as separate struggles. The repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell, the policy that barred gay and lesbian soldiers from openly serving in the military, was concurrent with the failure of the DREAM Act, which would allow undocumented immigrants who came to this country as minors a path towards permanent residency. The satisfaction regarding the repeal of one and the disappointment at the failure of the other left me ambivalent and, for that matter, silent: I felt guilty about either condemning or praising the government, spoiling the party or mocking the mourning. It is my desire as an artist and activist to move beyond that silence, to insist on a co-constitutionality that requires creativity to develop goals of social justice that do not divide racial and sexual minorities to fight separate battles, to create work that moves beyond this ambivalence via celebration, to spoil the party by not just by insisting that we could be having a much better one, but by throwing it myself.

Party Planning for Revolutionary Art: The Tools of Pleasure

Of the tools of pleasure that I used in the performance that began this essay, the most obvious is comedy, more specifically in the form of parody. This turn to comedy is, in part, a critique of performances that stage the suffering body with empathy as the goal of performance. What it is *not* is a rejection of empathy as a goal of performance: I love my empathy, both as a performer and as an audience member. However, I do believe empathy can and must be tempered with pleasure to avoid some of the pitfalls that I experienced during the class on "Performing Race in American Cultures" that generated

the peace. Taught by Dr. Deborah Paredez in the fall of 2010, this class had, among its organizing question, “How have racialized subjects used performance as a method for intervening in prevailing ideologies about "race" and racial difference?” (Paredez, TD387D 1) To engage with this question, we were called upon once during the semester both to bring in examples of performance texts to analyze through the lens of our weekly readings and to provide an artistic response—in any genre—to the readings, which would then be analyzed in class. In other words, we were asked to interrogate artistic intervention both as spectators and as artists. Despite this question being stated in the syllabus, a number of the performance analyses did not focus on interventions that troubled racist hegemony but on reifications, particularly on moments where white subjects—ranging from radio DJs in California to protestors at Glenn Beck’s rally in Washington D.C.—used racial mimicry, minstrelsy and appropriation to further their personal or political goals. These performances provoked a number of negative affective responses: I remember a lot of anger over racist performance practices, shame and awkwardness among white students at being associated with such individuals, feelings of pain on the part of minority subjects—myself included—as we watched or listened to performances that objectified and humiliated us. The artistic responses, likewise, often focused on these same painful affects, frequently soliciting and eliciting tears. More than once, the experience of watching these performances was a negative one: I often felt hailed as an audience member to witness, and perhaps expiate, white guilt, to empathize with someone who was feeling pain not because of his or her oppression, but because of his or her privilege. It felt as though the dominant means of intervening in racist

ideologies was to perform suffering, whether as an artist or a critic: even white students felt a need—perhaps even felt called upon—to demonstrate the painful effects of racism. At times, such performances of pain came off to me as unselfconsciously masochistic (and I prefer my masochism self-conscious, with more leather).

This dynamic turned me towards one of the most lucid critiques of empathy I've encountered: in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in 19th Century America* (1997), Saidiya V. Hartman reads a critique of slavery in which John Rankin, a white abolitionist, imagines himself and his family in the place of the slaves being beaten by an overseer. Hartman notes that this is a classic scene of empathy, that "empathy is the projection of oneself onto another in order to better understand the other" (Hartman 19). Yet in order to do so, "Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination is presumably designed to reach" (19). The reading of pain in a black body becomes a performance of white pain that, in the passage that Hartman cites, borders on masochism, with the scene being imagined "'in lively colors,'" leaving Rankin claiming that "'every indignant principle of my bloody nature was excited to the highest degree'" (18). The black bodies in question have been forgotten in favor of this reverie of white suffering, suggesting that the individual slave is as disposable in the mind of the abolitionist as he or she is on the plantation. Hartman's analysis hints towards the problems of performed and consumed suffering, that "if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration" (19). Such obliteration is

inherently antagonistic to coalition building: the acknowledgement of suffering can turn into the usurpation of suffering when those who may not have been suffering to begin with call for healing, taking time and energy from the original bodies in pain. The ramifications of this are many and pernicious, but for the purposes of this essay, I am most interested in the potential of this obliteration to cause rifts between different minoritarian groups: as much as empathy for one another's pain can unite different groups that have experienced oppression, to what extent can this turn into a competition, an attempt to usurp suffering from one another, an insistence that one group has suffered more than another, or just as much as another group has suffered in the past? How can we avoid this pitfall, or, perhaps, climb out of it once we fall in?

I do not offer a definitive strategy; rather, I offer the one that works for me. For this class on performing race, I chose to do a performance where a story of suffering—my feelings of exclusion with the white normative beauty standards of gay marketing—was made into a performance of pleasurable resistance, one that, yes, relied on many of my privileges, but did so in order to negotiate the ways in which I experience oppression, laughing at the oppressor and myself in the process. Hartman—who, it must be said, operates on a different matrix of privilege and oppression than I do—might object to this, as she points out that performances of pleasure can be every bit as problematic as pain, particularly when one uses the example of minstrelsy. Nevertheless, another scholar, with her own set of privileges and oppressions, sees a potential for powerful pleasure in the body of the African American minstrel. Jayna Brown, in *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (2008), offers a reading of African American

minstrelsy performers that marks their own performance as having distinctly different valences from that of a white minstrelsy performer, particularly when the character they perform is resistant to white authority. African-American performers of the wild, recalcitrant Topsy can reveal "a sense of the ability of farce to disrobe authority. Her self-denigrating tactics are executed with a sly grin, suggesting the defiance behind them" (Brown 74). Like Rankin's slave, Topsy is frequently beaten, but audience members attempting to project their own suffering onto Topsy will have their usurpation of pain re-inscribed as farce. According to Brown,

> . . . what makes farce funny is the ability of its figures to take the slaps and punches, to fall from the first but still get up again, bruised and bleeding yet all the while slyly glancing up and around, in multiple directions. Topsy taunts her owners to inflict punishment from which she then refuses to suffer. As Bakhtin asserts, in its true form farce is layered, dialogic. The figure cannot be slapped down, but keeps rising up, keeps refusing to obey, keeps offering pun and quip." (77)

My personal marginalia at this point in Brown's book is the word "Yes!" with multiple lines underneath. Oppressors can always trace the suffering of oppressed bodies in the hegemonic system back to the failure of the oppressed to properly perform their oppression, in an effort to justify violence against them: lawyers, defendants, judges and juries can insist that someone would not have faced violence if they had spoken English, or not worn a tight dress, or not flaunted their sexuality, or not looked at a white woman. As Hartman argues, even the performance of suffering before allied bodies can result in an erasure of the suffering body of color (or female body, or queer body, or disabled body) in favor of the vicariously suffering white body (or male body, or straight body, or

able body), which, if it exhausts itself suffering for the other, can always walk away from the struggle.

To refuse to suffer, to stage the ability to survive that suffering with humor, may not call the morality of the punishing system into question the way that the performance of suffering does, but it sure questions its power. As Judith Butler says in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), "Where the uniformity of the subject is expected, where the behavioral conformity of the subject is commanded, there might be produced the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command" (Butler 122). This parodic mode is difficult to negotiate—parody can be misread, can go by unnoticed, and can result in even greater violence when those in power realize they are the butt of the joke—but, as Butler points out, "It is this constitutive failure of the performative, this slippage between discursive command and its appropriated effect, which provides the linguistic occasion and index for a consequential disobedience" (122).

The parodic mode in my performance was no doubt clear to the audience in front of me: I chose to parody Lady Gaga's "Just Dance," a song by an artist who has become an icon over the past few years in no small part because of her appropriation and commodification of queer culture, one that she repays by being vociferously supportive of gay normative causes like gay marriage rights. I took an easily consumable pop song and made it a meditation on body image and race in the gay world, taking the time to call out some of the most heinous practices with lines like, "One club asks black men for multiple forms of photo ID./ We try to boycott it, but most guys here just don't care." I

also parody the even more iconic image of "the gay torso," the image of rock hard abs and hairless pecs transformed into a fat, hairy (and racialized) body that mocks the regime that attempts to exclude it: "When I come through on the dance floor going out to shake my butt/ Can't believe my eyes, so many guys with the same haircut./ Man, these Castro boys are sure stuck in a fashion rut,/ And if you don't look like them you find the door is shut, yeah." Yet there is another element to my performance that extends beyond parody, visible, although not necessarily legible, in my half-naked body and the cheap cardboard "set" I have constructed from myself, made from recycled materials and two cans of spray paint. It is an element that allows me to bring back Mikhail Bakhtin (to whom Brown referred in her engagement with farce) and to take humor into a realm invested in community building: the realm of *CampCamp!*

***CampCamp!*: The Queer-It-Yourself Network**

CampCamp! was an open-mike night oriented to queer performers and audiences that ran from 2005 to 2008, hosted by Rayna Matthews and Silky Shoemaker. It is also a crucial element of my own performance genealogy: *CampCamp!* is where I *really* learned how to queer, where I developed a performance aesthetic that engaged queerness in a way that combined a pre-existing love of humor with a reveling in the body—my queer body—that I'd never had the guts (no pun intended) to include. It also inspired me to embrace its combination of camp and DIY aesthetics to create performances that have a carnivalesque feel, one that combines *CampCamp!*'s aesthetic practices with my own love of humor to (hopefully) create what Mikhail Bakhtin terms the "ambivalent laughter" of carnival.

In "*CampCamp!*: Performing DIY Camp A**es****th**e**tics** (sic)" (2009), Matthews cites Ida—the radical queer community located in rural Tennessee that became the subject of my first one-man show, *Promised Land: A Radical Queer Revival*—and its performance festival, Idapalooza, as a significant element of *CampCamp!*'s own performance geneology. Ida and Idapalooza create a space in which not only performers but also audience members can revel both in the flashy costumes associated with drag and in their own bodies. In Ida, "'Fabulous' is a gender expression all are encouraged to wear, coaxing even stone butches into glitter and feathers. Nudity is permitted, and for many transgendered folks, it is a rare occasion to expose the flesh of their bodies without fear of being rigidly delimited by their anatomy" (Matthews 24). Matthews insight does not extend merely to trans folks; as my musical number in the race class suggests, the performance of the "fabulous" and the exposure of non-normative, cisgender gay male flesh are not typically found together outside of Ida, and even less typically embraced. What was remarkable about *CampCamp!* was its ability to recreate the Ida environment behind an Austin coffee shop. In fact, as one who approached performance from the stance of a writer, *CampCamp!* called on me to acknowledge and incorporate my fat, queer, Latin@ body into my work in ways I may never have otherwise. Matthews remarks that *CampCamp!*, like Ida, is a space in which,

> The reality of flesh and anatomy exposes the materiality of bodies that might seem to undermine preferred gender identities and performances. Butch lesbians show their curves, gay boys expose their unsculpted chests. The camp masquerade of artificiality slips, the body is undeniably real, yet it is precisely through this slippage that we confront the contradictions of bodies and identities to expand what is possible and desirable (76).

It is not without some pride that I point out that a description of one of my performances immediately preceded this passage, a piece called "Free Cupcakes" that first saw me stand behind a cardboard cut-out sky as an Abercrombie billboard in a direct precursor to my piece in the classroom. It was with this in mind that I exposed my flesh and insisted on its fabulousness, reveling in and parodying the music of Lady Gaga in order to expand what is possible and desirable, not merely for myself, but for my audience as well.

This expansion of the possible shares much in common with Bakhtin's notion of the carnival. According to Bakhtin, "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and obligations" (Bakhtin 10). In the case of *CampCamp!* and Idapalooza, the hierarchies in question related primarily to those of heteropatriarchy, but as with carnival, the blurring of the distinction between performers and spectators, the presence of bodies on and off-stage troubling gender and exposing flesh, is paramount. Bakhtin is rather dogmatic about this: "Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people (7). Certainly, Idapalooza, taking place over the course of a week in isolation from the world at large and consisting of as many parties as performances, would have much more in common with the carnival Bakhtin describes. Yet *CampCamp!* was able to create an Idapalooza in miniature, one in which the footlights created a performance that nevertheless called upon its audience to join in the carnival.

It did so through a methodology that I brought into my performance work via the spray-painted, collage-covered cardboard set piece that contained my performance of/as a gay icon: a blending of DIY and camp aesthetics. Matthews acknowledges the feminist critiques of both of these aesthetic strategies, but it is her contention that DIY and camp can answer one another's critiques when brought together. "*When DIY and camp dance together, the anti-consumerist politics of DIY leaves stains on Camp's party dress, and DIY goes home unexpectedly covered in fabulous glitter*" (Matthews 26). More directly, Matthews is arguing that the "fabulous" aspect of camp answers the masculinism associated with DIY, while DIY in turn leaves its mark on camp's apparent privileging of white, upper class gay male aesthetics by making camp accessible to all spectators at a low cost, even for those who are unskilled performers. Yet she chooses to describe this not as a union, but as a dance. To dance in pairs is something that many queer people had to enjoy clandestinely in the days before Stonewall. It represents not the consummation of desire, but the expression of it, the potentiality not fully realized. Dance here does not foreclose, but opens possibilities for those willing to step into the matrix of desire. To perform in the realm between DIY and camp is to be caught up in this dance, a dance that is at once intimate and inviting, like the dance of the carnival. It allows the dancers to find new spaces of desire not simply for aesthetics, but for the self, making it a fertile ground for explorations of queerness.

As much as I love dancing, though, what I'm really good at is making people laugh, and the laughter I am most interested in the laughter of carnival, which Bakhtin insists, "is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts

and denies, it buries and revives. . . . The people's ambivalent laughter . . . expresses the view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it" (Bakhtin 12). I have come to truly love the term "ambivalent laughter" in the time since I first read it. I wish I'd had it earlier, after I did this performance in class and heard responses from students; while the majority of the class laughed, cheered and were willing and able to read the critique of white heteronormativite gayness in my performance, the two gay men in the class each had some resistance. One, a fellow Latin@, was surprised that I didn't revel in my sexiness *more*; as criticisms go, this is perhaps one of the best I have ever received. Another asked the question "What are we laughing at?" It was an interesting question coming from a white gay man whose own body fit far more easily into mainstream gay aesthetics than mine ever could: did he feel threatened by my critique, or was he worried that I had made myself the butt of the joke? I cannot tell, and, as an artist, at a certain point I must be willing to run the risk of alienating some people in my audience. In class, I responded by saying that *I* was being laughed at, and that I was happy about this, because as soon as I heard laughter, I knew that my audience was paying attention. Had I been up on my Bakhtin, I would have said that I am more than willing to make myself part of the jokes I use to mock the system, a system that I am always implicated in. I choose to laugh ambivalently, as one who is marked as an insider by my gender, my education, my class and my skin-tone, an outsider by my race, my sexuality and my gender expression, just to name a few. I am not the suffering body in need of aid, but the dancer in search of partners. Like the carnival spectacles, my performances, I hope, "do not command nor do they ask for anything." Instead, they insist, and perform, that

another world is possible.

On to the Carnival: Methodology and Chapter Outline

Before I begin to discuss my critical methodology and give an outline of the rest of this thesis, I just want to say this: writing about one's own art is a very difficult process. What is perhaps most frustrating about it is the feeling that I am being redundant, that I have already said what I needed to say in the way that I wanted to say it, and that if I was unable to make myself clear the first time, then it was a failure on my part and one that I would rather address with another performance. I do not think I am alone among artists in wanting to say, "Look, just see the show." With this in mind, I wanted to talk about my goals in this thesis. My first goal is to obtain a Master's Degree in the hopes that it will make it easier for me to do my art and receive funding for it; I hope such frankness is appreciated. In addition, while I feel *Promised Land* stands on its own as an act of resistance to racism in the gay community, I want to take this opportunity to explore this problem in greater detail than I could in a 70 minute performance that needs time for songs and jokes. The first draft of *Promised Land* was written in a difficult moment for queers of color: the passage of Proposition 8 not only stripped myriad California citizens of the right to marry the people they loved, but also resulted in a flowering of racism in the gay community, as many white gay writers and activists blamed African Americans for the passage of the bill. In this essay, I hope to go into further detail on this moment and on other examples of racism in the political and cultural quest of many gay Americans to be accepted by a heteronormative mainstream that is, as I have said before, always already a white heteronormative mainstream.

Finally, I hope to give artists a road map in this essay for how I create my own work in the hopes that it helps them create their own. I have more than once called myself a magpie: I steal bits and pieces of other artworks to create my performances. Some of these pieces are there to inspire me, to give me blueprints as to how to make a compelling performance. Some are there as references in the finished work itself that I hope trigger associations in the minds of my audience members, linking the themes of my work to other pieces that I admire. Some are there as object of parody, and some are there to get critiqued so that an audience is able to see what is problematic about them. In this essay, I will take up the pieces that I have stolen from as much as my own as an exploration of process, of how a critical examination of these works can be taken up in art. With these goals in mind, I hope to write something that is more than a supplement; having said that, if you can, see the show.

My methodology in this thesis is one of performance and media studies. I will be offering a close reading of my own performance, *Promised Land: A Radical Queer Revival*, to examine those moments when I take up issues of race and queerness most directly. As a magpie, however, I will also turn my attention to the other art works that went into my performance. These include other performances, poems and numerous films that either get a passing reference in the piece or, in the case of the biopic *Milk* (2008), an entire slam poem that is, indeed, interested in slamming it. I will also address a number of articles on the passage of Prop 8 that I was reading at the time of writing *Promised Land*, opening up that conversation to include additional articles that further illuminate the moment in question. In each case, close reading will be my primary mode of analysis

with these pieces; *Promised Land* was begun two years after leaving a graduate program in English at U.C. Berkeley, and as such close reading was part of the process of making the work itself, analyzing the pieces that I borrowed from and critiqued to create not a published work of criticism, but a performed work of art. I also focus on close reading because, as a practice it is highly individual and subjective, an act that is frequently performed in a private engagement with a work even if it then leads to, or follows from, engagement with a group. Likewise, *Promised Land* is a highly individual and subjective work of art, an autobiographical piece that attempts to represent a moment in my life. It performs my reading of the larger gay mainstream and a small community of radical queers and how I came to find my answer to the question, "How does queer liberation begin?" an answer that is individual, contingent, incomplete and offered to a group for their enjoyment, criticism, and embrace.

Chapter 1, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Being (Gay)," provides the reading of the gay mainstream, an examination of the political and cultural moment in which *Promised Land* was written and the ways in which *Promised Land* illustrates this moment in performance. This chapter can be thought of as a diagnosis, a search for symptoms that point to a grave illness that prevents the queer rights movement from achieving coalition with other minoritarian communities, most particularly communities of color, the illness being an attachment to a heteronormativity that is always already a white heteronormativity. It begins with an examination of the primary complaint, the symptom that made me see a need for a diagnosis: the "black homophobia" meme that was promulgated by Dan Savage and others shortly after the election of President Barack

Obama and the passage of Proposition 8. I will show how the fallout from these events reveals the racist limitations inherent in the identity politics of the gay rights movement—a politics that relies heavily on performances of suffering and appeals to empathy that can and do perform erasures of the suffering of bodies of color—and that these limitations which exclude bodies of color are the same limitations that exclude queer bodies of non-normative gender and sexual expression. After all that heavy material, it will be time for some shopping, in this case, at Gay Identities 'r' Us, a fictional store I created for *Promised Land*, where Topher, an endlessly chipper salesman who aggravates and endears, attempts to sell me on a number of racialized gay identities. This performance of disidentification with a gay culture invested in white heteronormativity reveals another symptom of disconnect between sexuality-oriented identities and racialized identities: the untenable position of the body of color that cannot or will not (and even I'm not sure which one of those describes me) conform to a social script that confines its race, its weight, and its gender performance to a white, masculinist norm. By rendering this scene as comic, I am able to withstand the suffering imposed by this position while insisting that I am implicated in it. I will also take up the film *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* (1998) and Terence McNally's Tony Award-winning play *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1995) to begin an exploration of the ways in which white gay mainstream artworks marginalize Latino gay men, making them antagonists in the search for romantic (and heteronormative) love between men. This provides a bridge to the analysis of *Milk*, the Academy Award winning film about the life of gay rights activist Harvey Milk that came out within a month of the 2008 elections. This film which

garnered a great deal of attention in relation to the Prop 8 win, provides a perfect illustration of the investment of mainstream gay culture in presenting itself as white not only through its depiction of Jack Lira, Harvey Milk's lover in the time immediately leading up to his death, as the antagonist in the love story between Harvey Milk and his previous lover, Scott Smith, but by the exclusion of queers of color in queer history. These symptoms of exclusion and marginalization made evident in this last document lead me to my ultimate prognosis: that the current assimilationist gay rights movement is so deeply invested in whiteness that LGBT persons of color and anti-assimilationist queer rights movements can and must form new coalitions that critique the white heteronomativity of the gay mainstream.

The prescription? Take a dose *Promised Land* and call me in the morning. If *Promised Land* is not available, read Chapter 2, "Carnivals of the Queered," in which I show the ways in which *Promised Land* creates a queer world which insists that the battle against heteropatriarchy is always already a battle against white supremacy, and must be acknowledged as such in order to succeed. Being a world that already seeks to disrupt hierarchies, I choose to create this world by means of my tools of pleasure, creating more than one carnivalesque environment in the course of the show. In "*Who Wants to Be a Radical Queer Performance Artist?*: Carnival of the CampCamped" I inaugurate the world with a game show that takes place in the dance between camp and DIY aesthetics posited by *CampCamp!*, turning the audience into the laughing guardians of the queer world that demands that I engage with the history of queer people of color—and call into question my own privilege—before I can enter. In "Communion: Carnival of the

Sprinkled," I bring the audience to its feet for a small party that satirizes religion (in the true carnival tradition) with the help of performance techniques drawn from Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens, who feed and flirt with their audience in a manner that, frankly, I wish all performance artists would emulate. Sprinkle herself, along with Sandra Cisneros, provides a mode of answering the injurious hail of "Latin slut" that Brown and Butler would be proud of. Finally, "An Ode to Sylvia Rivera: Carnival of the Self" takes on the racism of *Milk* with a slam poem, one that performs the self in a manner that draws on Jose Esteban Muñoz's reading of Michel Foucault while remaining in the carnival mode, suggesting that it is by moving in the world in a carnivalesque mode which insists that queer liberation need not be perfect, but it can and should be edifying, hilarious, orgasmic, and, dare I say it, fun.

The conclusion, "Utopia and The Birth of Olivia Cruz," looks to my latest performance piece, *Footnotes for People Who Don't Speak Spanish*, developed with Beliza Torres Narvaez for The University Co-op Presents the Cohen New Works Festival at the University of Texas at Austin, 2011. The title of the piece is taken from a response that my colleague, Cassidy Browning, made in our conversation about Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Coco Fusco's "Couple in a Cage" (1993); when it was pointed out that Gomez-Peña's "native myth" told in gibberish in fact contained a number of Spanish words and phrases that would have indicated to Spanish-speakers in the audience that he was only pretending to be a member of a heretofore undiscovered Native American tribe, Browning quipped, "Well, what do we expect him to do? Provide footnotes for people who don't speak Spanish?" This section will examine "Couple in a Cage," analyzing

those moments when the performance by Gomez-Peña and Fusco subverts many of the critical claims they made later as critics, opening up a space where Latin@ performers can engage in the same performance of pleasure by camping up, parodying, and even eroticizing the stereotypes that might cage them. It is in this space that Olivia Cruz—a drag character first created for a performance at Ida who has been brought fully to life for *Footnotes*—lives, loves, and agitates for revolution, insisting that the place of a non-normative, non-passing drag queen of color is on the frontlines in a fabulous outfit. With Olivia, I transform Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque into a utopia that I am far more comfortable with: the "utopian self," an identity that is inherently unreachable but which opens up new modes of being by its imminence.

One more word about the Race and Performance class: the professor, Dr. Deborah Paredez, once commented in her class that, as a woman of color, she could not have a livable life without hope. The goal of *Promised Land* was to give hope to those who did not know that a place like Ida, a place where people who will not or cannot fit into the gaystream can find freedom, family, love, and a really hot make-out session or two, if they want it. Yet I have also realized, over the course of writing this essay, that the goal of the piece was to provide pleasure in the moment of performance, and that this is an important goal in itself. If Dr. Paredez cannot live without hope, then I cannot live without joy, without performing it and displaying it and insisting it is there in the world to be had now. This may have a lot to do with my own privilege, but I cannot somehow extricate my privileged self from my oppressed self. It is not simply that as a queer, I am a cisgender male, or that as a Latin@ I am pale enough and speak English with enough of

a white American accent to pass for white. It is that these racial, gender, and sexual identities that inform one another in me, create one another in me, and create me in their interplay. To only perform my suffering would be disingenuous and hypocritical; it would divide me from those I would seek to empathize with, and whom I would have empathize with me. Instead, I laugh at myself, even as I laugh at the world, and I hope that the world laughs with me, that at the end of the day, I will not be crying alone.

Chapter 1: The Unbearable Whiteness of Being (Gay)

Gay Rights Circa 2008: The New Black or the Old White?

My first trip to Ida took place in late December, 2008, but I was already clearing a mental space for my first one-person show before I went, having spent a few weeks writing daily, waiting for the great idea. I had begun what I felt was a productive writing spurt on gay identity, due in no small part to my perception that, at the time of writing, the rights of people of color and queers were being framed as mutually antagonistic on a national level. The tremendous joy felt at the election of President Barack Obama was tempered by the passage of Proposition 8, which put an end to same-sex marriage in the state of California. Even as a great deal of frustration was directed at source of funding for the campaign to pass the bill—in particular to the Mormon Church—there also arose a meme around the involvement of African American voters and the passage of Prop 8, more specifically the idea that African American voters were in some way responsible for the passage of the bill. It is this meme, and the fallout from it, the failures of empathy (not failures to empathize, but failures enacted by the performance of suffering and the call for empathy) that act as the first symptom leading up to a troubling diagnosis: the

deep investment in whiteness of the assimilationist gay rights movement.

This meme flourished despite the ready availability of information that would contradict the assumptions behind it. One of the biggest proponents of the meme was Dan Savage, who posted on his blog in Seattle's *The Stranger* a brief personal response to the failure of Prop 8, citing the statistic that "*Seventy percent* [emphasis Savage] of African-American voters approved Prop 8, according to exit polls, compared to 53% of Latino voters, 49% of white voters, 49% of Asian voters" (Savage). As is often the case, the accuracy of these statistics is highly questionable: shanikka (sic), a blogger on *Daily Kos*, examines the methodology of CNN's polling process, pointing out that the random selection of precincts for polling would prove problematic in accurately representing the voting patterns of African Americans as "virtually all of this state's Black folks live in just 9 of the state's 58 counties . . . The vast majority of the counties in this state have a percentage of black residents between 1 and 2%" (shanikka). A random sampling of precincts could easily render a strikingly small amount of polling data on African Americans. Nevertheless, Savage makes no attempt to question those statistics, nor do Caitlin Flanagan and Benjamin Schwarz in their op-ed piece for *The New York Times*, "Showdown in the Big Tent" (2008). They write,

> They came to the polls in record numbers to support Barack Obama, and they brought with them a fiercely held and enduring antipathy toward homosexuality: 7 in 10 blacks voted in support of traditional marriage. Whether that was the game-changer or not is a question for near-constant debate. Many gay activists have begun quietly to suggest that had Hillary Clinton been the Democratic nominee, Prop 8 would not have passed (Flanagan and Schwarz 1).

Leave aside for a moment the presumptuousness of describing the "antipathy" of African

Americans as "fiercely held and enduring," a statement that not only assumes that the authors know the depth of feeling of 70% of African American voters (or all of them, as the grammar of the sentence seems to lump the 30% who voted against Prop 8 as part of the same "they), but that also suggests that such feelings are insurmountable, marking African Americans as a permanent enemy of homosexuals (this assumes that there are no queer African Americans). Instead, focus on the suggestion that Clinton's candidacy would have resulted in the failure of Prop 8. Nate Silver of *FiveThirtyEight* points out that if one *does* take the exit polling at its word, "first-time voters -- the vast majority of whom were driven to turn out by Obama (he won 83 percent [!] of their votes) -- voted against Prop 8 by a 62-38 margin. More experienced voters voted for the measure 56-44, however, providing for its passage" (Silver). This statistic belies the notion that Obama's candidacy drew out voters with "fierce and enduring homophobia," suggesting instead that it is "experienced voters"—who, by definition, would be more likely to skew older—that enabled the passage of Prop 8. In addition, Michael Patrick Gross, in his article for *The Advocate*, "Gay is the New Black?" (2008), points out that the margin of victory "was so small—2.3% of the total vote—that it would be possible to blame almost any group of voters." For that matter, "less than two thirds of registered voters in San Francisco and Los Angeles even bothered to show up to vote, because polls so unambiguously predicted Obama's win" (Gross 2). This is not two-thirds of African American voters, mind you: this is two-thirds of all voters, leaving it well-within the realm of the possible that queer voters of all races failed to get to the poles that day, doing their part to contribute to that small margin and snatch defeat out of the jaws of

victory.

There is also a troubling equation within this meme between being against marriage equality and being not simply homophobic, but possessing "fierce and enduring homophobia." Certainly, Flanagan and Schwarz suggest this homophobia is ingrained in African Americans in ways that go beyond the most common explanation: a tie to religion. They claim that, "Although it has come as a shocking realization to many in this community, a host of sociological studies confirm that many blacks feel a significant aversion to homosexuality itself, finding it morally and sexually repugnant" (Flanagan and Schwarz 2). There is no citation here, no reference to any individual member of this "host of sociological studies." Again, this claim is remarkably easy to deflate. Kathryn Kolbert, President of the People for the American Way Foundation, pointed out that, outside of California and outside of marriage, African Americans voters showed less homophobia than their white counterparts. "On November 4 there was an anti-gay initiative on the ballot in Arkansas to prohibit unmarried couples from adopting or being foster parents. White voters supported that anti-gay initiative by a 16 percentage point margin, twice the margin for African Americans in the state" (Kolbert). Kolbert is also quick to point out that this "aversion" is not only cultivated by white leaders on the religious right, but also that such an "aversion" is possible to overcome.

> Religious Right leaders have exploited the discomfort among many African Americans with white gays who seem more ready to embrace the language and symbols of the civil rights movement than to be strong allies in the continuing battle for equal opportunity. . . . During a Cincinnati referendum in 1993, anti-gay groups produced a videotape targeted to African American audiences; the tape featured Trent Lott, Ed Meese and other right-wing luminaries warning that protecting the civil rights of lesbians and gay men would come at the expense of

> civil rights gains made by the African American community. . . . Eleven years later, however, African American religious leaders and voters helped pass an initiative striking the anti-gay provision from the city charter. (Kolbert)

It is clear from these examples that homophobia can be found in the African American population, and that the right can and does exploit this homophobia. It is equally true that homophobia can be found in the white population, the Latin@ population, the Asian American population and so on. What is vitally important in Kolbert's argument is that such homophobia is cultivated by forces on the right and can be challenged and overcome via coalition between queers and straights of all colors; equally salient is the realization that pitting queers and racial minorities against one another is a tactic that serves no one quite so well as the enemies of both.

If this is the case, then why do writers like Savage, Flanagan and Schwarz persist in propagating the notion that African Americans are to blame for the passage of Prop 8? I cannot fully know their reasons, but I suggest that part of this results from the failures of a politics that relies on empathy and the performance of suffering. Savage's post seems particularly driven by a performance of suffering. He titles his piece "Black Homophobia" despite using the term "African American" in the article; whatever the race of the homophobes may be, the homophobia itself is "Black," carrying all the implications of evil and dirtiness that the word implies in other contexts. After citing the questionable statistics, he writes, "I'm not sure what to do with this. I'm thrilled that we've just elected our first African American president. I wept last night. I wept reading the papers this morning. But I can't help but feeling hurt that the love and support aren't mutual" (Savage). For Savage, voting for Obama—whether it was because of his race,

because of his policies, or simply because he wasn't the far more openly homophobic John McCain—constitutes "support," while weeping, presumably, constitutes "love," a display of affect as much associated with suffering as with joy, and certainly, the reasons for Savage's weeping are meant to be ambiguous: is he weeping for joy at Obama's face in the papers, or in pain because of the statistics about Prop 8's success? Regardless, he asserts an emotional connection with African Americans, but when he finds evidence that such a connection may be resisted, he is quick to indicate whose pain he values more. Despite claiming that he doesn't know what to do (other, presumably, than write a blog post about it), Savage is able to jump to a profound conclusion. "I'm done pretending that the handful of racist gay white men out there—and they are out there, and I think they're **scum**—are a bigger problem for African Americans, gay and straight, than the huge numbers of homophobic African Americans are for gay Americans, whatever their color" (Savage). Savage is adamant enough in his condemnation of racist gay men to call them scum in bold print, but in his view there are only a "handful" (Five? Ten? A few thousand?), and for Savage the sheer number of African-American voters outweighs whatever economic or political power those racist gay men have (if he were to include closeted gay men in business and politics in his "handful," this might be a spectacularly inaccurate assumption).

In doing so, Savage not only marks his own suffering as greater than that of African Americans, he obliterates their suffering, turning away from it and his feelings of being a jilted lover with ease: "This will get my name scratched off the invite list of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which is famous for its anti-racist-training seminars, but

whatever" (Savage). For all that Dan Savage argues in his post that homophobic African Americans are a threat to African American queers—indeed, in an update, he claims that "African American gays and lesbians are the ones who suffer the most from African American homophobia" (Savage)—this statement makes it clear that this is not the audience to whom he speaks. After making a statement that he recognizes could be construed as racist (because, well, it is), he not only reminds the readers of his own status as a gay celebrity, he flippantly dismisses what he sees as the major consequence of such a statement: not offense or hurt on the part of African American readers, but the idea that he might be excluded from an elite gay rights organization, one whose leaders may or may not include people of color. The seeming affective connection to African Americans is revealed as a desire to connect only with people who define themselves on the same terms that Savage does: by sexuality, and *not* by race.

Robin Tyler—of the gay marriage case *Tyler v. Los Angeles*—does not elide the problems of racism the way Savage does, but her own response to the passage of Prop 8 uses the same statistic to express feelings of suffering and anger, titling her piece in *The Huffington Post* "Why We Feel Betrayed" (2008). This betrayal bases itself once again on a failure of empathy, the failure of African American voters to recognize the struggle for same sex marriage as commensurate with their own.

> With regard to African American voters, 70 per cent of your community sided with the same kind of bigots who supported slavery, who fought against interracial marriage, who vote to send your people who are addicted to prison instead of rehabilitation centers, and who vote to cut off aid to your families, saying that it is a 'moral' issue because 70 per cent of your children are born out of wedlock, and therefore, you should be responsible. These are the bigots with whom you sided! You got in bed with your enemies, the very people who have f----d African

> Americans again and again, in the name of 'morality' and their religious beliefs (Tyler).

As with Flanagan and Schwarz, the 70% of African American voters somehow becomes all African Americans. The repetition of "you" is noteworthy here: this is "your community," "your people" in prison, "your families" that have "your children" out of wedlock. The second person is rigid: this is "your," never "our." There is no suggestion that it is queer African Americans being sent to prison, or queer families raising children out of wedlock, even though she later insists that "Black male same-sex couples in the U.S. are almost twice as likely to be living with a child as a white same-sex couple." Instead, the social ills of African Americans and queer Americans are framed as exclusive to one another; I am reminded of the spatial metaphor of intersectionality, picturing queer African Americans being forced to relocate to People of Color Blvd once they become the victims of racism rather than homophobia.

This idea of looking at race and sexuality as exclusive categories has pernicious consequences for the campaign itself. Paul Hogarth talked about his own volunteer work in *The Huffington Post*, saying that misinformation spread by Prop 8 supporters—they had claimed gay marriage would be taught in schools—was a leading reason why otherwise "tolerant" people were voting for it. "I spoke to a black woman in San Francisco's Western Addition who was dead-set against gay marriage now that she had been scared into believing we were imposing our lifestyle on her. And when people are afraid, it's hard to make them listen to facts—especially if they don't know you" (Hogarth). Yet such beliefs were difficult to contradict when, according to Hogarth, the

Prop 8 campaign was focused too heavily on reaching out to other gay people, particularly those who lived in communities that defined themselves as gay.

> I was happy talking on the phone with swing voters—which was useful and effective—but they seemed more interested in having us do visibility in San Francisco, going to strongly liberal (even gay) parts of town to make sure our base knew they had to vote "no." Rather than preaching to the choir, we were told this was useful because much of our base was confused—that some supporters think they're supposed to vote "yes" on Prop 8 to affirm gay marriage (Hogarth).[3]

Just as Savage is more concerned about gay-rights organizations punishing him for his racist statements than he is about actually offending African Americans, so too, if we take Hogarth at his word, was the "No on 8" campaign apparently more concerned about gays voting than reaching out to communities that might be initially antagonistic to same sex marriage. Hogarth suggests that, had there been an investment ahead of time in reaching out to communities that defined themselves by race—many of which may have included queer voters—then there could have been a different result on that day in November.

Indeed, Gross further calls the assumption of "love and support" on the part of white gays into question in his article while pointing out that, among those 30% who did vote against Prop 8, there were vocal allies:

> African American leaders in the Congressional Black Caucus—particularly Barbara Lee—and state leaders such as former San Francisco mayor Willie Brown worked hard on our behalf; many of them were quicker to come to our defense than our

[3] Hogarth is quick to point out that such confusion occurred on both sides: "When I dropped "No on 8" literature in East Oakland, I ran into an African-American woman--who said she would vote "no" on Prop 8 because she "really didn't want" gay marriage being taught in public schools" (Hogarth). It therefore becomes highly questionable as to what extent gay rights campaigns directed at people who, as Hogarth points out, already lived in communities that defined themselves by sexuality—in other words, the most likely to vote against Prop 8 and to already be well-informed about what voting "yes" or "no" meant—was an effective strategy.

> white peers. And they did this even though white gay people have never, en masse and in force, showed up to support them and their issues (Gross 2).

Even though Gross reveals that the assumption of an African American populace cruelly turning its back on a (white) gay populace that voted for "their" presidential candidate is predicated on racism itself—something that could have been the point of the article—he continues, because he nevertheless has an answer to the question "Gay is the New Black?"

> At present we are the most acceptable targets for the kind of casual hatred that American society once approved for habitual use against black people. Gay is the dark pit where our society lets people throw their fears about what's wrong with the world. (Many people, needless to say, still direct this kind of hatred toward black people too. But it's more commonly OK to caricature and demean us in politics and the media in ways from which blacks are largely exempt) (Gross 3).

For all Gross's critical insight into statistics, he gives in to the same overgeneralization that plagues Savage. It is questionable at best whether depictions of gays as "what's wrong with the world" have managed to eclipse negative, stereotypical depictions of African American as inherently violent, misogynistic, lazy etc., or whether the anti-gay rhetoric of various politicians silences the coded attacks on "urban" life. Even if one were able to argue that they had, gays would have fierce competition from Latin@ immigrants and Muslim Americans for occupancy of "the dark pit," a phrase that would be hard, if not impossible, to remove from its racial connotations. Gross here gives in to the same empathic erasure in which Rankin indulges in Hartman's text: even as he says that gay people suffer as African Americans once suffered, even as he acknowledges that many people still direct vitriol at African Americans, these connections are subordinate to the primacy of gay suffering.

The cover of *The Advocate* takes Gross's argument as justification enough to remove the question mark for the cover. The cover itself (pictured with the article) is black, with the words "GAY IS THE NEW BLACK" in white all-caps. Underneath, in yellow, is the subtitle, "The Last Great Civil Rights Struggle." The complexity, such as it is, of Gross's article has given way to framing gay people as not simply the next great civil rights struggle, but the last. After gay people get their rights, presumably, there will be no more great struggles; Latin@s, Muslims and any other groups that become objects of hatred will just have to stay in that dark pit. The presumptuousness of this title, along with the starkness of the cover's design, provides a visual shock that is designed, of course, to get people to pick up and buy the magazine. The ones who will be most drawn to buy such a magazine, of course, would be gay people like Dan Savage, who agree with the statement; those who disagree may read the article in a store or online, but would be less likely to buy. The assumption, therefore, must be that *The Advocate* assumes that a sizeable portion of its readership feel the same sense of being, or even the desire to be, "The New Black," to co-opt the legacy of the African American civil rights struggle that had just brought an African American into The White House. This begs the question as to what happens to readers who are also "The Old Black," particularly as they would be the ones most cognizant of the still-present effects of racism.

There is a troubling answer to this question: the meme created an environment in which treating African Americans in a racist manner became justified as a response to homophobia. In other words, the failure of empathy empowered white gay activists to inflict suffering on those whom they felt had not heeded, and sought to heal, their own

pain. Rod McCullom wrote on his blog that,

> Geoffrey, a student at UCLA . . . joined the massive protest outside the Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Westwood. Geoffrey was called the n-word at least twice. “It was like being at a klan rally except the klansmen were wearing Abercrombie polos and Birkenstocks. YOU NIGGER, one man shouted at men. If your people want to call me a FAGGOT, I will call you a nigger.” . . . Los Angeles resident . . . A. Ronald says he and his boyfriend, who are both black, were carrying NO ON PROP 8 signs and still subjected to racial abuse. “Three older men accosted my friend and shouted, "Black people did this. I hope you people are happy!" A young lesbian couple with mohawks and Obama buttons joined the shouting and said there (sic) were "very disappointed with black people" and "how could we" after the Obama victory. (McCullom)

As with the case of Hogarth, this is anecdotal evidence, and although there is more than one story here, it is possible that such stories have been exaggerated, even fabricated. What cannot be denied, however, is that the meme has now created an environment where such events are plausible, where the feelings of “hurt” and “betrayal” described by Savage, Tyler and others can be seen as part of a spectrum that leads to “If your people want to call me a FAGGOT, I will call you a nigger.” Instead of creating community, empathy results in erasure, the positioning of gays as “The New Black,” and when African Americans resist the equation of black and gay civil rights struggles, those straight African Americans who do feel empathy, even those queer African Americans who face the same prejudices themselves, are made to feel the pain other have refused. Their involvement is apparently unwelcome in the struggle.

It is not only people of color who may be excluded from this brave new world of the Last Great Civil Rights Struggle; those of non-normative genders may also face exclusion. Gross relates watching TV coverage of Prop 8 protests in San Francisco.

> News reports mostly showed the same types of images the media insists on using

> when covering gay pride parades . . . a drag queen screamed, "The problem with living in a bubble is that bubbles burst!" She was fierce, and I was moved, but I also wondered why she was the one on the news that night, why this movement still doesn't have a Martin Luther King Jr., a telegenic, brilliant spokesperson to whom all of America can relate. The dedication of movement organizers has brought us a long way, but we are now in desperate need of a willing leader with solid media sense, a palpable inner core, an ability to navigate the game of hardball politics, and the balls to step forward and be our public face (Gross 2).

For Gross, a drag queen, however fierce (a word so frequently associated with African American drag that I would argue that the drag queen in question is plausibly, even probably, African American herself), is not the one who should be speaking for the gay civil rights struggle. Never mind that working-class, transgender queers of color are overwhelmingly the victims of fatal queer-bashings[4]; we need someone "to whom all of America can relate," which implies, and not without reason, that the majority of the American public will be unable to relate to someone who chooses to disrupt gender normativity in public. What this person needs to be is "telegenic" with "solid media sense;" the overwhelming presence of white people on television and in the media takes us further away from the possibility of a person of color leading the movement, not to mention a leader who deviates from the narrow standard of beauty available on television. Finally, the leader needs balls, suggesting that half of queers are unqualified, although the drag queen in question isn't, provided she put on men's clothes and untuck. Gross can criticize gays for failing to come to the aid of African Americans when their own lives and liberties were on the line, but he gives in to the same presumptions that a

[4] According to The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (re-posted by Samhita Mukhopadyay of *Feministing*), of the 22 confirmed reports of hate-motivated, fatal violence against LGBTQ Americans, fully half were transgender women (with additional victims being feminine-presenting men) and 79% were people of color. This does not account for unconfirmed reports of fatal queer-bashings.

non-normative person (plausibly of color) is not worth listening to or, indeed, speaking to. He is unable to hear the drag queen he quotes, which is a pity, because I am curious as to what bubble she refers. Could it be that the bubble of white gay assimilation as perpetrated by the same leaders who failed to stop Prop 8? Could it be the bubble that puts issues that particularly affect the transgender on the back-burner in favor of pursuing marriage rights[5]? If she is indeed African American, could it be the bubble that causes gay rights activists to argue that African Americans should support gay causes because there are gay African Americans, even when they deny support to African American causes?

Regardless, I would rather listen to her than wait for Gross's ideal spokesman, not just because the drag queen has shown up to protest and is angry. By protesting in drag, this queen is staging the degree to which she will not assimilate into heteronormative society, and I believe that, as a willful outsider, she may have a clearer view of the house of privilege than the imaginary, telegenic hero. That might be what's making her so angry. Michael Warner, who ruthlessly critiques the push for gay marriage in *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life*, speaks in that book of James Collard, then editor of *Out* magazine, describing himself as "post-gay" and insisting that "'anger no longer has the power to unite us'" (Warner 62). Warner records,

[5] According to Adele Carpenter, in a guest post on *Racialicious*, pointed to Proposition K, which would decriminalize prostitution, as an opportunity for LGBT activists to work in behalf of trans people. She claims that "that many, many young LGBT people in this city earn their livings as sex workers and daily face risks to their safety, and that trans women working as sex workers have lost their lives while working in the city within the last two years" (Carpenter). However, Carpenter claims that there was "shockingly little effort among LGBT people to educate themselves on the realities facing sex workers or the background on Proposition K—Let (sic) alone to spread any word about it" (Carpenter).

in his own words, a response by Kendall Thomas: "no one would say that the appearance of some racially mixed club settings or the rise of the black bourgeoisie or the appearance of one black sitcom in any way meant that African Americans are now free to be 'post-black.' Why did the limited gains of some lucky gay people mean that we were suddenly 'post gay'?" (62). These claims were made in 1998; ten years later, with eight years of near-unilateral conservative governance under America's belt, an African American president was preparing to take office and thousands of queers in California were protesting on the streets, threatening the Mormon Church and, in some cases, suggesting that gay people now occupied the space of blacks in a "post black" nation. Whether Thomas or Warner used the phrasing, to say that one has moved past an oppressive identity category is to assert freedom, and that the gains of a "lucky" few, even if that gain is the White House, cannot grant that freedom to *any* member of *any* identity group, however the "lucky" few may cherish that bubble of safety that passes itself off as freedom. When Prop 8 burst that bubble, the display of suffering on behalf of Savage, Gross, Tyler and so many others erased and devalued those who could see the bubble from the outside, those people whose bodies and behaviors served as a reminder of just how fragile that bubble was: the oustiders of white heteronormativity.

Shopping Towards Gomorrah: Gay Identities 'r' Us

"Individuals do not go shopping for sexual identity"—Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* (7).

"That's what YOU think!"—Topher, manager of Gay Identities 'r' Us, in my head when I read that.

As much as I would love for the racism and exclusion that I have explored here to be news to me—something I had never before noticed and was shocked to uncover—the truth is that this was not news. Although I had never fully analyzed the racism of the gay rights movement, I had been well aware of the racism of gay popular culture since I came out in the mid-90s, somewhere between *Philadelphia* and *Will and Grace*. If Prop 8 is the symptom that brought the investment in white heteronormativity to my attention, this section is something of a patient history, an exploration of previous moments when the racism of the gay mainstream was brought to the fore. I focus on the gay films and plays that showed me that the place of Latino gay men in the white gay world was as distractions at best, antagonists at worst, and on the clothing store that, as the performance that began this thesis indicates, has become my arch-nemesis in performance: Abercrombie and Fitch. These are the enemies that I brought into my show in order to stage my disidentification with white gay mainstream culture. Developed by José Esteban Muñoz in the aptly-named *Disidentifications*, disidentification is "meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (Muñoz 4). It is "a model of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology that fixes the subject within a state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of the self within the social" (97). In *Promised Land*, I stage my elision and punishment as I attempt to reformat myself in the social, via a fictional store called Gay Identities 'r' Us.

I have only anecdotal evidence and my own impressions of audience response to account for this, but people love Gay Identities 'r' Us. As I began workshopping the show, the addition of the scene prompted more talk and more compliments than anything that had come before. I am not sure if they love Topher, the salesman who takes me by the hand in my journey through Gay Identities 'r' Us, but I know that my director does, and I know that I do. Although writing him initially with the actor Topher Grace playing the role in my imagination—hence the name—later, I began imagining the role as inhabited by a friend of mine from San Francisco who reveled in gay culture. He had a perfectly-toned gym body. He talked about dating older, wealthy men. He made up nicknames for drugs, and he always greeted me with a warm, affectionate variation on the theme of "Hey, slut!" I adored his unapologetic attitude, in no small part because it frequently annoyed those gay men I knew who preferred to hide their flames under a bushel. It is for this reason that I chose, later in the piece, to keep Topher from being a purely negative figure (a good move on my part, as it allows for "ambivalent laughter" that both embraces Topher's unabashed gayness and derides his social rigidity). Instead, Topher is driven solely by his joyful desire to find everyone—and I mean everyone—a gay identity that fits, even if the majority of gay identities are designed with white normative gay men in mind.

Although I am invested in making Topher ridiculous, to perform him as weak would be a fatal mistake: his flamboyance must be read both as a personal rejection of masculinism and as a privilege in which he can indulge because he is white, educated and a figure of authority as gatekeeper to the gay world. As Topher, my eyes go wide, an

imitation of the friend I upon who I based him and one that, it occurs to me, makes my otherwise almond-shaped eyes go wider: in other words, more white. I also mark the whiteness of Topher and Gay Identities 'r' Us with sound design: the song "Holiday for Strings," plays on a loop throughout the scene, just as music in a mall might be. "Holiday for Strings" is a song that immediately evokes the consumerism of the 1950s and 60s, a consumerism intimately associated with the burgeoning white middle class. When I arrive in this world, I claim that I have been told to come here for my gay identity, to which Topher responds, "And by the looks of it, whoever told you that was doing you a favor. We are going to fix you right up today!" (Ramirez, *Promised Land*). As Topher, my posture is straight, my arms locked at the elbow and ready to gesticulate. When I perform myself, I relax into my body in a way that lacks all the confidence of Topher's forward chest and tight stomach. There is no suggestion in my text that there is another place to go, and by Topher's estimate, I will be unable to enter the gay world—or at least be at a disadvantage if I do enter it—until he "fixes" me, meaning both that he intends to repair me and to lock me into a rigid identity, to "fix" me in one place. Topher is the one in control, the one in power; he is flamboyant because he can afford to be.

It is in this realm, with this power dynamic in place, that I am offered a selection of identities that, for one reason or other, fail to fit. Each failure is a disidentficiation, a moment where my desire for legibility is thwarted despite my desire to fit in. I reject "the club twink" because it may require me to go blond, marking the identity as one invested in whiteness. I select the hipster twink and Topher agrees that it would be a perfect fit until we discuss my body. When I reveal that my waist size is 36 inches, the background

music stops, and Topher rejects the twink on my behalf: at a 36" waist, I am too heavyset to be a twink. He suggests that I gain weight to become a bear[6], and I am interested until I hear that, according to Topher, I will have to, "Butch it up! You know, act manly. Don't say 'Girl.' Watch football, drive a truck or a motorcycle, drink beer" (Ramirez, *PL*). When I ask if I can be a bear without having to be manly, the music stops once again, to let Topher respond in the silence "You did say you wanted to get laid, didn't you?" (Ramirez, *PL*). These identities, of course, are highly specific and based primarily on body type: twinks are thin and hairless, whereas bears are heavyset and muscular. Is there a more basic identity that could work? Topher assures me there is: "Don't worry, darling! If all else fails we'll just put you in Abercrombie & Fitch." This is cold comfort, and I respond, "I hate that store with a passion that almost exceeds my passion for dick." Topher has a smile and a comeback: "You know what was the most important word in that sentence? 'Almost,'" (Ramirez, *PL*).

I have hated Abercrombie & Fitch for a long time, but it was Dwight McBride, in the title essay of *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality*, who anatomized that hatred for me, by offering up evidence of the brand's investment in establishing itself as a signifier of whiteness and privilege and arguing that the readiness with which the brand has been adopted by many men in the gay mainstream reveals a

[6] A note on bears: in a later moment in *Promised Land*, I am quick to point out that my feelings of alienation from bear culture are based not on its valuation of larger bodies, but from the same sense of conformity that I experienced when I attended bear events. I describe the experience with the question "Have you ever walked into a club and noticed that every guy in there had the same haircut?" As Nathaniel C. Pyle and Michael Loewy point out in "Double Stigma: Fat Men and Their Male Admirers, "the emphasis [in bear culture] is generally on the hirsute and stereotypically masculine qualities of the bear. This was bears avoid the stigma of being fat, which is associated with laziness, self-indulgence, and stereotypically feminine traits like softness" (Pyle and Loewy, 147). I include this for all future readers who worry that my piece fails to interrogate my feelings about bears. They're complicated.

desire to have that brand stamped upon them, to signal their whiteness and privilege. In the 1990s, Abercrombie & Fitch began identifying itself as representative of "a 'collegiate' lifestyle that is inevitably and overwhelmingly white and middle class" (McBride 65). The key here is the equation of a specific class of whiteness not simply with collegiate youth, but with American citizenship itself. McBride cites the *A&F Look Book* and its extensive use of the terms "natural," "American" and "classic," which he identifies as "often understood for the coded ways of delineating the whiteness that they represent" (68), which is "also an investment in class" (69). To buy Abercrombie, then, is to buy into an idea of America that is white and upper middle class. Certainly, there are many gay men out there buying Abercrombie who are white and upper middle class—in fact, I would not be surprised if this constituted the overwhelming majority of Abercrombie's gay consumers—but the prevalence of the label in gay mainstream communities identified by McBride can be read as evidence of a desire to assert this identity, to assert American citizenship, to announce privilege to a world that would deny certain privileges to white, middle class men because they are gay. As McBride says, "a very clear marketing and advertising strategy that celebrates whiteness . . . depends upon the racist thinking of its consumer population to thrive" (66).

To assume that this racist thinking is natural and not cultivated is to do as much damage to gay men as it would do to African Americans to assume that homophobia in their communities is natural and not cultivated by the religious right. Abercrombie has made a performative appeal to racism that is, as with any other performance, citational, in this case carefully constructed as such, and that offers gay men a brand that will always

mark them as the beneficiaries of white privilege. McBride points out that, at the time A&F began going for a more "collegiate look," CEO Michael Jeffries "tapped superstar fashion photographer Bruce Weber (widely known for his Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, and Karl Lagerfeld ads) for the playful coed shots on the walls of Abercrombie stores" (65). McBride is perhaps being coy here; Bruce Weber's Calvin Klein ads are icons of homoeroticism, and it is highly plausible that the decision to use Weber was, in part, motivated by a conscious desire to appeal directly to gay consumers. In *White*, Richard Dyer cites Stephen Maynard's study of these images, that the blend of white bodies (no bodies of color were used in these photographs), black and white printing to heighten the whiteness of the underwear, and "classical Greek imagery and Weimar German photographic styles" resulted in an ad campaign where "'homoeroticism comes to be defined as white'" (Dyer 76). This point is crucial: Weber's work is selling a racialized homoeroticism, a gayness that is always already white, a white gayness which Abercrombie & Fitch now cites and with which it identifies itself by using Weber's work. This white gayness is, in its own way, a co-constitutional identity, an identity that is racializes its sexuality and sexualizes its race, but it is a presumptive one, a damaging one, one that predicates itself on the erasure of bodies of color to establish gayness as whiteness. This is not to say that it erases consumers of color: certainly, people of color can and do buy Calvin Klein underwear and Abercrombie & Fitch clothing. Rather, it creates a world of white gayness that all consumers can buy into: whiteness for sale off the rack. It is a brand that establishes its wearer as literally invested (those ugly clothes ain't free) in the ideal of white, privileged America. Even if whiteness is not available to

everyone, this investment in whiteness is: Topher assures me that even if no other identity works, I can buy Abercrombie, marking myself as someone who supports the white gay mainstream, even if I cannot find a place in it.

This whiteness—particularly as it relates to underwear—has other resonances for Dyer besides the homoerotic: whiteness means sexual cleanliness, and this meaning would have had a particular appeal to white gay consumers in the 1990s, when the Bruce Weber Abercrombie campaign began. Dyer claims that "Whiteness, we have come to believe, shows the dirt with unique clarity and certainty. In particular, it shows the dirt of the body. This is why it has such a privileged place in relation to things which are kept close to the body" (76). This is the root of its ties to underwear, but Dyer particularly notes the place of sexual cleanliness as it relates to the bridal context, where whiteness "bespeaks the absence of sex, a dirt that is at once literal (sweat, semen, secretions and, in fantasies about virgins, blood) and moral" (76). Dyer fails to bring this "absence of sex," out of the bridal; he perhaps doesn't realize that three of the four bodily fluids that underwear brings to light happen to be the primary means of transmission for HIV. If gay purchasers of A&F products recognize the photographic style of Bruce Weber—and, as I suggested, it is possible that the CEO selected Weber with this in mind—they will also recognize the implication of whiteness as a site not just of homoeroticism, but clean homoeroticism[7]. Furthermore, A&F launched this campaign during the Clinton

[7] Some have objected to my formulation here, arguing that these images are invested in selling a homoeroticism of potentiality: the underwear is clean precisely because it suggests that it will soon be stained by semen and any other body fluids of choice. I am not sure that the two notions are mutually exclusive. The potential for sexuality is just that: potential. The equation of whiteness with virginity in the bridal context always carries with it the knowledge that, within a matter of hours, her "whiteness" will be

Administration, when the focus of the gay rights movement began shifting from AIDS relief to gay marriage; their gay market would have been ready for a brand that would allow them to buy into images of American citizenship and cleanness, a sexuality that sells itself in clean underwear, free from unfortunate stains that might mark it as soiled by disease, rich, white and healthy with all the rights and privileges therein.

When I say healthy, I don't just mean free from disease. I also mean thin, and just as much as I may have the privilege of rejecting Abercrombie's appeal to whiteness (rather than being rejected by it) because of my light skin, I come pre-rejected because of my size. Having said that, I do not think my race and my size can be separated any more than my race and my sexuality: I am up against a white heteronormativity that is also a thin white heteronormativity, a white heteronormativity that has a history of establishing the otherness of bodies of color by marking them as fat. Elena Levy-Navarro claims that "'obesity' has helped define what it was and is to be 'white' or 'American' just as it has helped to define what it was to be nonwhite or ethnic. . . . Widespread fears of 'obesity' coincided with a cultural anxiety over the influx of immigrant groups, especially Italians and Jews" (Levy-Navarro 16). These anxieties have carried over as Latin@s have become the largest immigrant population in the United States; indeed, Levy-Navarro cites an unnamed Latina writer who "lives in two worlds . . . one would insist that she is 'obese,' the other understands her to be 'bien-cuidada,' or well cared-for." (16). It is only

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soiled. Yet that does not erase the virginity of the bride, nor does it elide the importance of virginity, or at the very least the pose of virginity, in the marriage ceremony. Likewise, I would argue that the potential for dirtiness does not erase the importance of establishing cleanness, that a pose of white cleanness (and clean whiteness) will always establish white cleanness even if there is the suggestion that this white cleanness may not last. The sexuality is still racialized by its investment in presenting itself as clean, if only for the moment.

in the white world that the her weight is seen as a negative, taking up an excess of space that might, perhaps, be occupied by more than one better-proportioned white body. It is not that these bodies, marked as non-white, just happen to be fat. It is that they are marked as non-white because they are fat, and marked as fat because they are non-white. In other words, race and body type are co-constitutional.

Sexuality, of course, must also be co-constitutional with race and body type, and in the fat Latin@ body—the kind of body I have, the body standing in Gay Identities 'r' Us, unable to find an identity that fits—you can mark that co-constitutionality with one word: excess, whether on the male or female body. Julia McCrossin traces the excessive Latino male body back to the novels of Willa Cather, where "fat men are signifiers for a consuming mestizo, or borderlands, culture that threatens the tight boundaries of racial subjectivity . . . linking this fearsome consumption to Hispanic men suggests an apprehension over the enactment of Hispanic masculinity" (McCrossin, 244). That the men can only be swayed from their meals by young women suggests that "the threat of Hispanic masculinity is generated by their desires . . . excessive desires of the flesh for food and young women" (245). Latinas, perhaps even more so than men, are marked by the same excesses of appetite and sexuality and fears of miscegenation. In "Jennifer's Butt," Frances Negrón-Mutaner takes up Jennifer Lopez's most famous body part:

> A big *culo* upsets hegemonic (white) notions of beauty and good taste because it is a sign of the dark, incomprehensible excesses of "Latino" and other African diaspora cultures. Excess of food (unrestrained), excess of shitting (dirty), and excess of sex (heathen) are its three vital signs. A big Latin butt is an open air invitation to pleasures construed as illicit by WASP ideologies, heteronormativity, and the medical establishment through the three deadly vectors of miscegenation, sodomy and a high-fat diet (237).

In both cases—the Chicano man and the Boricua woman—the excessive body represents what cannot be controlled. Indeed as McCrossin and Marcia Chamberlain both point out in separate essays, there have been repeated attempts to control the Latin@ diet: "Americanization programs . . . warned immigrants to choose 'white' foods because, as one critic later noted, 'eating un-American foods [i.e., spicy, exotic foods] could be interpreted as a protest.' Mainstream foods were less threatening as well as supposedly less fattening" (Chamberlain 101). Eating the fattening foods of the Mexican and Caribbean diet become viewable as a mark of willful rejection of American citizenship[8]. The fat body's excess rejects the white standards and is therefore rejected in turn.

Although the investment in white, thin heteronormativity is clear to me, I cannot assume that it would be clear to my audience. Unfortunately, I have neither the time nor the desire to explain all of this to an audience that might have little knowledge of the gay community at all, much less the interplay of race, sexuality and body type in such a world. Instead, I close the scene in Gay Identities 'r' Us by confronting race directly, in the hopes that I can at least make it clear that the white gay mainstream marginalizes people of color as much as it does the heavyset. In frustration at being unable to find an identity that works, I swear in Spanish and Topher is elated: "Are you Mexican? Well,

[8] Indeed, the embrace of the fat body can become a marker of solidarity. In an interview with Claudia Pérez documented in *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos and the Performance of Memory*, Deborah Paredez records how Pérez identifies her the three things that anger her as the stereotyping of Mexicans, claims that Selena had a padded butt, and laws against Latinos. According to Paredez, "By embedding her sentence concerning Selena's butt within comments about the circulation of stereotypes about Mexicans and legislation against Latino people, Pérez points to the ways that constructions of Latina sexuality figured centrally in the creation and maintenance of national nativist projects" (Paredez, *Selenidad* 135). Just as homoeroticism is figured along lines of whiteness in the A&F Look Book, so is Latina sexuality defined and circumscribed by the excesses of the Latin butt, a butt that takes pride in its own authenticity even as white America claims there is no room for it.

why didn't you tell me? We have a whole line for Mexicans!" I am relieved, until I hear, "There's the sexy gardener, the sexy pool boy, the sexy auto mechanic" (Ramirez, *PL*). The audience does tend to laugh here, but it is a laugh at a lower pitch, the "ho-ho" that suggests that they know what I am talking about: pornographic identities, racialized (and highly masculine) sexual fetishes that are stereotypical and classed lower than the identity A&F is meant to provide. The implication is that I can use my race to get laid, provided I play into a white man's sexual fantasy. When I reject them, Topher says, "Okay, not into uniforms," and offers me the choice between "two Latin slut looks. There's the evil Latin slut, who tries to break-up the white boyfriends, usually because one of them is rich, or the stupid Latin slut who just distracts one white boy from the other white boy he really loves" (Ramirez, *PL*). Here, the excesses of Latin@ sexuality are finally brought to the fore: I am allowed to claim a gay identity, provided I make no claims towards desiring love, commitment, or a marriage that might signify an entrance into the white, upper-middle class gay world.

In *Promised Land*, there is only a brief moment where I can offer evidence of this: I ask where these ideas of the Latin slut come from, and Topher responds incredulously, "Have you *seen* a gay movie? *Lie Down with Dogs*? *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*? *Love! Valour! Compassion!*? It did win the Tony Award for its portrayal of two white lovers torn apart by a vicious Latin whore" (Ramirez, *PL*). Although these can only be passing references in the performance, in this essay they are crucial symptoms that need examination, particularly as they will establish a pattern that will be part of my analysis of *Milk* later in this essay. In each of the pieces Topher lists—all of which I had either

seen or read within a few years of my coming out—a highly sexualized Latino gay man represents the barrier to love and commitment, a move which serves to mark heteronormativity as white and the Latino man as the enemy of white heteronormativity, in effect allowing white heterosexuals and homosexuals to unite against the Latin@ queer. *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* is particularly vicious in its marking of Fernando, Billy's occasional Latino lover who keeps him from establishing a heteronormative commitment, as inappropriate precisely because of his race. Billy is deeply invested in a heternormative commitment, insisting in the opening of the film that, unlike a number of gay men, he is interested in finding a long-term committed partner. This is framed as envy for the presumably less sexualized world of heterosexuals: as he laments his difficulty in finding commitment, he says, "Let's face it. You straights have it all" (*Billy's*). Once again, a second person pronoun proves most significant: he is not addressing this at gay people (who, let's face it, would be the most likely audience members for a gay romantic comedy), but at heterosexuals, appealing to their privilege as one who is outside it and desires it. All of these appeals are made during an opening montage of polaroid photographs featuring Billy along with happy gay and straight friends and couples; when we finally see Billy in the flesh, his flesh is alongside that of Fernando. Billy introduces us with a pause before naming him: "Fernando, who I'm seeing, kind of. Sort of" (*Billy's*). Billy says "Fernando" in an exaggerated tone of voice, as though the Latino name is everything you—remember, the you that has already been identified as straight people—need to know about the relationship. Of course, it is: throughout the film, Billy's white friends (he has no other kind, although his white

friends are both gay and straight) repeatedly get Fernando's name wrong, calling him Francisco or Frederico, causing Billy to correct them with the same disdain that he uses when he first names his lover, while in bed with him. Fernando is apparently interchangeable with any number of Latino men whose names begin with "F" (and we all know what "F" can stand for). If Billy is invested in heternormative partnering, Fernando is invested in queer relations: he has sex with Billy even though he is already partnered, insists that he is in an open-relationship and that his partner doesn't mind, and suggests that Billy join them in a threesome. When Billy ends the relations hip, Fernando tells Billy that it was never just about sex, to which Billy counters with a sarcastic, "Right, it was 'spayshul,'" (*Billy's*), mocking Fernando's accent. For Billy, a relationship outside a heteronormative binary that defines love as monogamous commitment and anything outside monogamous commitment as either meaningless or dangerous is as strange, as difficult to comprehend and as worthy of mockery as a Spanish accent.[9]

If the Latino lover ruins the potential for white heteronormative commitment in *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*, he shatters it in *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, suggesting that the Latino body is not just outside white heternormativity, but toxic to it. The play begins with a number of white gay men in their forties[10] relating the seduction of the

[9] When I first sat down to write this, I remembered Billy as finishing the film by having a flirtatious conversation with an African American man. Having rewatched the film, I was giving the filmmakers to much credit; the African American man winds up with an older friend of Billy's after Billy says that such a man is "not his type" (*Billy's*). Billy finishes the film flirting with a man who is just as skinny and white as he is. I hate this movie.

[10] The races of the characters are not established in the dramatis personae; it is entirely possible for one to cast any number of the characters as non-white, and to cast Ramon Fornos as any sort of blend of white, Native American and African heritage that one might find in Puerto Rico. Having said that, the original cast of the show, and the subsequent film, featured white actors playing every role except Ramon.

main protagonist's younger lover by Ramon, a young Latino man. The scene is meant to be read as being of ambiguous consent: the young white lover says "Don't. Stop. Please" (McNally, 12) in such a way as to make it difficult to tell whether he is resisting or not. Ramon is certainly more fully developed than Fernando: he argues passionately for gay men to love themselves, and he is repeatedly described in the script as being an accomplished dancer. Yet his self-regard and his beauty are intimately connected to his body: he says "I love myself when I'm dancing. . . . I love myself when I'm making love with a really hot man. I love myself when I'm eating really good food. I love myself when I'm swimming naked. . . . The rest of the time I just feel okay" (42-43). Once again, we have the excesses of the Latin@ body: Ramon loves himself when engaged with sex and food. He takes pride in another excess: the size of his testicles. He comes in from swimming in the first act to find that the cold water has caused shrinkage. "My nuts. Where are they? I have no nuts. They're gone. . . . I had enormous nuts. I was famous for my nuts. Where are my fabulous nuts?" Just after this talk about his nuts, another character asks, "I don't suppose you want to get married?" to which Ramon replies "No, but thank you" (23). It is a strange non-sequitur to juxtapose this question about marriage—not "I don't suppose you want to marry me" but the potentially more general "get married"—with talk about Ramon's skill as a dancer and fabulous testicles. Yet it is a synecdoche of Ramon's antithetical relation to commitment, the excesses of his body proving too powerful for the lead character's young lover to resist, whether because of desire, physical force, or both. Ramon, of course, must be punished for this: when the protagonist snaps and attempts to force Ramon's hand into a drain, threatening to chop

off his fingers in a garbage disposal. His friends stop him, but afterwards the incident is never mentioned. McNally frames the threat against Ramon's body as something that is forgivable, even forgettable, in a context where his body has broken up two white lovers.

I do not mention all this in show; I do not go into detail about the racism that I have seen in gay media since before I came out. I do not scream about the fact that a play in which a white man threatens to mutilate a Latino man and faces no consequences won a Tony Award. If I did, I don't know if I'd be able to recover in time to get on with the show. Instead, I offer pieces of information in a performance of disidentification with the standard coming-out narrative. I stage a "reformatting of the self" via division: I perform both Topher and myself, the dominant ideology and the minority subject. Portraying youth and a lack of self-confidence, I disidentify with the notion that coming out is the end of the story, that as soon as one accepts that he or she is gay and comes out as such, he or she will find a world waiting to accept them. In fact, for non-normative bodies, races, and genders, their troubles are just beginning: our desires have always already been framed and contained by gay mainstream culture, with a full spectrum of love and sexuality only available to white homonormative bodies. For queers of color with fat bodies who reject traditional masculinity, finding an identity is next to impossible.

Nevertheless, the despair is mitigated by the humorous deployment of stereotypes as selling points and my own attraction to stereotypes that might otherwise be devalued by society. I am excited about wearing leather as a bear, and respond to the chance to be a "bitter queen" quoting Oscar Wilde with "That does sound fun!" (Ramirez, *PL*). Topher buoys the scene with his unflappable enjoyment of nearly every stereotype, although he

has trouble handing me "the flaming, too-smart-for-his-own-good chubby queen who comes in for comic relief" (Ramirez, *PL*). It is very important to me that Topher never come off as cruel, that he is motivated primarily by a desire for everyone to have a happy gay life. The problem is simply that he is convinced that the only way for anyone to have a happy gay life is to conform to a finite number of identities, the majority of which are raced as white. Those that aren't raced as white are, in turn, founded on racist ideologies. By resisting the temptation to portray Topher as a ruthless oppressor, I incite the ambivalent laughter of the carnival. I am willing to implicate myself as one who wants to be part of this gay world and as one who may, in fact, be performing a recognized identity—the chubby comic queen—already. Even as I leave the scene, Topher—who, it must be emphasized, is literally me talking to myself—refuses to admit failure, calling out to me in his eternally "gay and triumphant" voice (to steal from Bakhtin) that I might enjoy being the white man's devoted lover, convinced that there is some way for me to fit into a larger gay world.

Turns out, he's right. Later in the piece, I return to Gay Identities 'r' Us in an attempt to squeeze myself into one of the identities I previously rejected. After they fail, I have a breakdown in the store and rant about the Abercrombie & Fitch billboard that I see every time I come into San Francisco, "staring at me like the Eye of Mordor." Topher shushes me in a panic: "The Eye of Abercrombie! You've seen it?" (Ramirez *PL*). He then takes me into a closet (further troubling the notion that one need only come out of the closet for one's problems to be solved), where he instructs me to find Fairyland, another name for the Promised Land. He assures me, "Find Fairyland and you will find

what you are looking for: something that fits you. The only thanks I need is a customer well-served!" (Ramirez *PL*). Topher is near tears with bravery; it is clearly dangerous for him to be telling me this, and he is happy to have finally figured me out, to have found an identity that will work for me.

When I included this moment, I did so initially because I wanted Topher to be redeemed, to assure those in the audience who are comfortable in their gay identities outfits that I am not condemning them for that comfort. However, having read Muñoz, there is another element that I hope to bring more to the fore in subsequent productions. Muñoz casts disidentification as distinct from counteridentification, the outright rejection of hegemonic ideology that can lead to separatism. He is concerned that "Counteridentification often, through the very routinized workings of its denouncement of dominant discourse, reinstates that same discourse," (Muñoz 97), and suggests that separatism of the kind practiced in Ida

> is not always a feasible option for subjects who are not empowered by white privilege or class status. People of color, queers of color, white queers and other minorities occasionally and understandably long for separatist enclaves outside of the dominant culture. Such enclaves, however, are often politically disadvantageous when one stops to consider the ways in which the social script depends on minority factionalism and isolationism to maintain the status quo" (13-14).

The Eye of Abercrombie may be allowing Topher to point me to Fairyland because it does the work of the gay status quo after all; those who remain separated are ostensibly contained, confined to a reservation. An act of resistance that continues to engage with hegemony requires that I go to the Promised Land and return to fight again. As my presence in graduate school indicates, that's just what I did. It was in the days

immediately following my return, as a matter of fact, that I realized how high the stakes were in my battle to claim a queer Latin@ identity that wasn't bought off the rack at Gay Identities 'r' Us. The Latin slut look was not just being worn in gay romantic comedies anymore. Now it was becoming part of queer history.

"What do you expect when you call a movie '*Milk*?'"

A question for the reader: have you ever been angry enough at an injustice depicted in a film that you felt the need to stand up and speak to the audience about its inaccuracy as soon as the credits started? I have, although I firmly believe the experience would not have happened had I not just returned from my first trip to Ida. I was not confronting homophobia; rather, I was confronting a whitewashing of gay history, a film that stood for liberation on the backs of people of color, and of Latin@s most particularly. Of course, as I say in a poem at the end of *Promised Land*, "What do you expect when you call a movie "*Milk*?" (Ramirez *PL*). The biopic of gay rights icon Harvey Milk eliminates his first name from the title, leaving a last name that also means a drink associated with motherhood, children and, of course, whiteness. If only the whiteness ended with the title: the cover of the DVD for the film *Milk* quotes Peter Travers of Rolling Stone: "An American Classic." As "Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch" has shown earlier in this essay, such words are red flags as to an investment not simply in American citizenship, but in whiteness. However heroic Harvey Milk's story may be, the film *Milk* is a story of liberation that alternately marginalizes and completely erases the contributions of people of color. I offer *Milk* as the final symptom of my

diagnosis: that the investment in white heteronormativity not only seeks to establish a white gay future, but a white gay past.

Indeed, if one watches *Milk*, one could easily come to believe that gay Americans were almost exclusively white and predominantly male. They certainly were before Harvey Milk's day: the film opens with a montage of films depicting gay people being arrested at various gay bars. All of the people being arrested in these pictures are white (and, with only a single exception that I can discern, male). In contrast, the only shot of these arrests in the documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (1995) features an African-American drag queen, suggesting that images of queers of color—gender normative or otherwise—being arrested were not unavailable to director Gus Van Sant. Indeed, the world of Harvey Milk himself is almost exclusively white: his staff is made of white men with one woman and one Asian American. Certainly, this was likely an accurate depiction of Milk's inner circle, but when Cleve Jones, one of Milk's staff members, calls for a rally, the screen fills with men calling one another: from what I can tell, not a single one of these men is African American or discernibly Asian American or Latino; the subsequent rally also includes no faces that can be read definitively as people of color. Only later in the film do faces of color begin to appear in rally scenes, suggesting that queers of color, rather than leading the charge for gay rights, only joined up after white activists (and one Asian) had done the legwork. These visuals are just that: visuals only. While a handful of straight African American characters have lines in the film, there are exactly two lines spoken by queer African American characters, one of whom is Sylvester, performing at Harvey's party: African Americans were apparently most vocal

as entertainment. Sylvester also manages to kill two birds with one line: he is the only gender non-conforming character who manages to speak in the film.

Of course, there is a prominent Latino character in the film: Jack Lira. Before I begin my analysis of Jack Lira in this film, I want to address the most common response to my objections to the way Jack Lira was portrayed in this film: "What if that's what he was really like?" I have no idea what Jack Lira was "really like," but, I would argue, neither do the filmmakers when it comes to the intimate relationship between Jack Lira and Harvey Milk. Both Lira and Milk were dead before any biographers could have asked them about the nature of their relationship, what drew them to one another, and what private moments they shared outside the purview of their friends and family. Instead, one of the primary sources for the film *Milk* was Randy Shilts' *The Mayor of Castro Street* (1982), a biography of *Milk* that does, indeed, offer a great deal of negative information about Jack Lira. Then I checked the sources, and I began to laugh loudly in the middle of the bookstore where I was working. Under "*Harvey Milk's Personal Life (1973-1978)*," Shilts says, "Scott Smith [Milk's lover before Lira] provided the bulk of this information" (Shilts 378) before going on to list other sources. Who among us would want the primary source of our biographical information to be the ex-lover of the partner we were with when we died? Who among us would want such accounts to be taken as definitive, without serious research into alternative sources? Yet Shilts makes no indication that he sought out people who knew Jack Lira outside of Harvey Milk's circle. It is therefore unsurprising that most descriptions of Jack are full of vitriol, making sure to brand Lira not just as a drunk but also as insufficiently masculine, a man who "spent

afternoons watching soap operas and evenings drinking with a set of queeny buddies who also gained the disdain of Harvey's friends" (180). It is therefore easy to see why the filmmakers of *Milk* created a highly negative portrait of Lira, and certainly, I believe that there is more than enough evidence to call Lira a mentally unstable alcoholic. Nevertheless, when one reads the biography and the film together with documentary footage, the tropes of *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* and *Love! Valour! Compassion!* described in the last section, and Van Sant's first film, *Mala Noche* (1986), one finds deliberate acts of degradation and erasure that can be seen as an attempt to ally a white heteronormative audience together with white gay men against queer Latinos. And I am not going to stand for it.

Milk meets Jack when Jack is huddled outside Milk's campaign headquarters in the Castro. He is shaking and falls over, presumably drunk or on drugs, as Jack asks Milk whether he finds Jack to be more like a palomino—a horse famous for its golden color and pale yellow hair, the only horse that could be considered, as a breed, blond—or a stallion "with big balls" (*Milk*). Terence McNally should sue: once again we have a Latino lover focused on his testicles, just as Ramon was in *Love! Valour! Compassion!* In contrast, the relationship as portrayed in the film between Harvey Milk and his white lover, Scott Smith (who is blond), begins with a kiss in the New York subway system, literally underground. When they return to Milk's apartment, a hand puts a record on: the music is a chorus singing "La la la" for an effect that puts one more in mind of Christmas carols than gay sex. We see shots of Milk and Smith in the apartment having drinks and leaning into one another as though they are about to kiss, interspersed with close ups of

Smith's left eye; at one point his fingers are visible, as though his hand is covering his mouth, almost like he is attempting to block a kiss. There is but a single shot of Milk's naked back as Smith nuzzles his head into Milk's shoulder. They could be dancing. They could have their pants on. The film then cuts to the two of them in bed, naked chests visible, genitals and legs safely out of shot; the only thing Milk is putting in Smith's mouth is ice cream. There is one final ice-cream smeared kiss before the film cuts out of the bedroom scene. The first sex between the two lovers is reduced to impressions, like something out of a perfume commercial. The kisses remind one more of a romantic comedy, a genre so heterosexual that I shouldn't even need to write "heterosexual" as a qualifying adjective.

Compare this to what happens when Milk takes Jack Lira into his office. There is no initial kiss; instead, we are shown two unmistakably naked bodies frolicking and giggling without the surreal Christmas music. The two men writhe together in bed, and we hear Jack moan loudly as they begin to playfully slap one another's naked butts. The film cuts to the two men in bed, Jack's voice saying, "My father beat me when he found out" (*Milk*). The butt-slapping has immediately been re-inscribed as reminiscent of abuse, the age difference between Milk and Jack reconfigured as an incest fantasy. If Milk and Smith were inhabiting the iconic image of the romantic comedy couple, Milk and Jack are seen speaking mostly in shadow—after Jack claims to love Milk following their first meeting, they finally kiss: a kiss cloaked in shadow. We can see *culo* when a Latin@ is involved in sex, but we are apparently not allowed to see something as intimate, something as potentially acceptable, as a kiss.

This shadow imagery is vintage Van Sant, and he uses it extensively in his first feature length film, *Mala Noche*, a film that relates the story of a white man in Portland pursuing an unrequited attraction to a handsome young Mexican immigrant and sleeping with another handsome young Mexican immigrant in the meanwhile; when viewed alongside *Milk*, Lira and Milk's relationship can be seen as even more degraded. The white man, Walt, insists that he "loves" Johnny, but his "love" is founded in racism and the knowledge that he has power over Johnny in white normative American hegemony. He says, "If every Mexican on Sixth thinks that they can stick it in me then they're wrong, they weren't too smart to begin with or they wouldn't be here" (*Mala Noche*). He claims, "They don't have fantasies, about sex or anything else. Erotic friendship. It's not their fault" (*Mala*). He says of Johnny, "The boy's insane, like all Mexicans, about driving fast and crazy . . . The look on his face is pure ecstasy, an incredible, beautiful, turned on face of an ignorant Mexican teenager" (*Mala*) Walt's desire is invested in his perception of Mexicans as being stupid, ignorant, crazy and free from dreams. When he cannot convince Johnny to sleep with him, despite his protestations of love, he offers Rodrigo, Johnny's friend, $15 to let Walt sleep with Johnny. That's right: he doesn't even negotiate with Johnny, treating him as property that can be bought through a go-between. As is, Rodrigo is willing to sleep with Walt, although we do see him take $10 out of Walt's pocket: Walt may not get to sleep with the man he "loves," but that does get him a discount. Walt, however, is full of resentment, "I was upset that I'd been fucked, violated and lost the money too" (*Mala*). This sex scene, and a later sex scene between Walt and Rodrigo, are all done in the same heavy shadow as the scene between Milk and Jack, and

Walt and Rodrigo are never seen to kiss, suggesting the same tawdriness, the same sense of sex based not on love but on the two lovers using one another: toward the end of the film, Walt remarks on the dangers facing Johnny as an undocumented immigrant on the road, saying "that's why I fell in love with Johnny in the first place. And that's why Roberto was silent most of the time, and chased white butt, if you know what I mean, hoping that sticky good comfort, luck and security might rub off on him, or at least he could make it squeal" (*Mala*). When I hear "sticky" in this context, I immediately think of semen, and read this statement as reifying the place of privilege in the white body, something that carries power even in white secretions (pun intended) and that can only be attacked though violation of the white body, even if that white bod has consented to it. Had I only seen *Mala Noche*, I might have charitably assumed that such an open commentary on racism could pardon the film that had come before, that we are not meant to empathize with Walt and, instead, are meant to critique his racism. However, when the same shadows that cover Walt and Rodrigo's relationship cover Milk and Jack's, I see a reification of racism, a statement that white men and Latino men using each other without love is just the way things are, not a challenge to that deeply dehumanizing paradigm.

Of course, the film is not done degrading Milk and Jack's relationship. Lest the audience doubt that Jack is the less acceptable lover compared to Smith, Milk's entire inner circle unites against their relationship. Let me rephrase that: the hatred they feel for Jack is the thing that unites Milk's otherwise contentious inner circle. The next time we see Jack, he arrives at Milk's victory party, claiming he finds it "exciting" that Milk is so famous. Cleve Jones, one of Milk's campaign staffers, offers a snide "The new Mrs Milk:

I give it a week" (*Milk*) a joke he shares with Anne Kronenberg, the white lesbian who initially met resistance when she joined Milk's exclusively male staff. Just as Billy makes a bridge to the white straight world by disdainfully pronouncing his lover's Spanish name, Cleve and Anne can bridge the gender gap by dismissing the Latino interloper, united in their whiteness. Later on, Milk arrives at a party where two wealthy gay men—with whom Milk had an antagonistic relationship earlier in the film—inform him that Jack has locked himself in the bathroom, only he is not named: he is first "your boyfriend" and then "the Latino" (*Milk*). As Milk goes upstairs, Cleve touches Anne's arm with a look of exasperation. Earlier, he had enjoyed keeping the same wealthy gay men out of Milk's victory party, but once again, the white gays can unite against "the Latino."

The film makes numerous attempts to frame Jack as wrong for Milk, particularly in comparison to Scott Smith. While both Smith and Jack complain about losing Milk to politics, Jack is seen holding Milk back from going to work with a housewife-ish combination of food and sex. Jack is waiting at Milk's apartment—claiming that he had to break in because Milk's white employee wouldn't let him in—in an apron. He has prepared a Mexican lunch and begins talking to Milk about watching *All My Children*. Jack then starts dancing for Milk, coaxing him into having sex. We finally see Jack and Milk kiss in full light, only to cut immediately to Dan White and his wife christening their child in church, mother in a white veil and an off-white dress, child swaddled in white. This juxtaposition gets Jack coming and going. On the one hand, he is rendered into a mockery of a wife, a man whose only power lies in cooking, having sex (and

breaking into apartments), a person that a masculinist gay culture would reject as hyper-feminine. On the other, he will never usurp the place of the pure heterosexual family, seen stripped of sexuality in a church in a moment that not only sanctifies childbearing, but echoes the marriage ceremony. Jack fails as a wife even as he fails at manhood.

The better match is clearly Scott Smith. Ostensibly, this is about intelligence and political commitment. At Milk's birthday, Smith arrives and teases Milk about "Cesar Chavez," suggesting that while there may be productive work that can be done by heterosexual Latin@ rights activists, to compare a gay Latin@ rights worker to Jack is hilarious. If such a tease is of questionable taste, Milk's response is disgusting: "I don't have to talk politics. I don't have to talk intelligently. I don't have to talk at all" (*Milk*). This is no marriage of true minds; in fact, its mindlessness is precisely what draws Milk to Jack (remember that Topher says, in *Promised Land*, that "stupid" is one of the "Latin slut" models available off the rack). At the end of a political meeting, Jack, Milk and Smith walk outside together, and as Jack walks ahead, Milk says to Smith, "I miss you." Smith replies with, "What's that about?" and a head nod in Jack's direction; on cue, Jack literally comes between them in the background, with the whining admonishment "Harvey, ya!" (*Milk*). "Ya," is Spanish for "enough," but the moment is more than enough to make it clear which relationship is valuable, and the fact that, in this moment, Jack speaks Spanish sends a clear signal that, just as the name "Fernando" marks Billy's lover as the wrong choice, just as Ramon's excessive Latino body dooms the white lovers in McNally's play, it is precisely Jack's race that makes him the wrong partner, that makes him the antagonist between two white lovers who should be together. No matter

that, at another point in the film, Milk claims that Jack registered 120 voters the previous week; not only does this audience not get to see this, but Cleve counters with, "So do any of our volunteers, but you don't go making them our First Lady" (*Milk*).

There is another moment that we do not get to see in the film: Jack Lira's funeral, which Shilts describes in his book. The film does depict Milk coming home to find Lira having hung himself in the bathroom: we see Milk ripping him down while screaming "No! No!" (*Milk*). We are then offered one scene in which a friend of Milk's (hard to identify off-screen) insists that Milk did everything he could. Milk weeps that he could have come home "at six instead of six fifteen," and then we cut to Milk speaking into a recorder, insisting that "Jack was gone. There was no time to mourn. There was no choice. I had to keep on. Keep on fighting" (*Milk*). This recording is framed as a section of Milk's final words; in fact, the actual recording that Milk made before his death made no mention of Jack or any other lover. Milk did take time to mourn, going to Jack's funeral, where he learned the extent to which Jack's father had emotionally abused him. Milk later received a letter from Jack's sister, in which she says, "You were better for him than anyone else" (Shilts 235). There were also other people ready to mourn with Milk; according to Shilts, "An avalanche of sympathy notes poured into Harvey's office. About half came from other lesbians and gay men who had lost a lover to suicide, often after they'd been arrested on a trumped-up charge, fired from a job or dishonorably discharged from the military" (234). This could have been a moment in the film, a scene or two that could have given a sense of the despair haunting queer people who had suffered abuse like Jack had, or who simply had to spend their entire lives in hiding.

There was not; Milk and the people who wrote him found time to mourn Jack Lira, but Dustin Lance Black and Gus Van Sant did not.

The film also fails to include a moment in Shilts' biography which claims that "When Harvey met Jack Lira, he confided to his friend Tory Hartmann, 'I've found the love of my life'" (192). While Shilts himself is quick to point our Hartmann's own incredulousness at this statement, its absence from the film, when combined with all the other acts of erasure and marginalization against Jack, reveal that the filmmakers of *Milk* were not interested in portraying Jack as a complex figure and an important part of Milk's life, but a blot, a stain, a brown mark that would heighten the tragedy of Milk's death: he wasn't even with the "real" love of his life, Scott Smith, when he died. The film isn't even interested in portraying Jack accurately when there is video evidence of how he acted: the documentary footage of Jack Lira in *The Times of Harvey Milk* shows some important differences between the real Jack Lira and his depiction in the film. When the film shows Milk's inauguration as a city supervisor, we see a shot of Milk and Jack walking in slow motion with a number of children at their side. Jack wears sunglasses, his eyes unreadable. His hair is unkempt and his movement has a looseness that, combined, suggest that he is not up to the gravity of the situation, if not simply that he is once again intoxicated. Compare this to the image of Jack Lira depicted in the historical footage: Lira's hair is cut short and carefully brushed, his eyes visible behind glasses (glasses suggest intellectualism; can't have that) and his walk noticeably free of swagger. In another piece of footage, one that was recreated for the film, Jack is once again well groomed and offers a little roll of the eyes when a news reporter talks about "the gays

taking over." Compared to his depiction in the film, we see at least a few instances of the historical Jack Lira looking calm, lucid and well put-together. What's more, he is looking at Harvey Milk with something that I have to call love. To be frank, the trivialization of that love in the film brings angry tears to my eyes. If the attempt to portray the gay rights struggle as easily understandable to and consumable by white heteronormativity results in the twisting of history, in the maligning and trivializing of queer people of color and their most deeply felt relationships, then the disease is too far gone for me. It is too noxious a symptom for me to believe that it is worth being part of such a movement.

Yet the film is not done; it performs as act of containment and erasure not only of a watershed moment of queer history, but of one of the most powerful examples of white queers and queers of color, of normative and non-normative genders, uniting together to inaugurate the struggle. Cleve Jones is *not* talking about this instance when he relates the story of a trip to Harvey Milk:

> I went to Spain last month. Long story. In Barcelona there was this memorial march for gay people that had died under Franco. Of course, the police tried to break it up, but these queens didn't run. No. They turned around and they started a fucking riot. I saw a bullet, one of those big rubber bullets rip through a drag queen's scalp but she kept on fighting. She was screaming but she kept on fighting. I mean, our lives. There was blood literally running in the gutter.

Milk replies to this story by saying, "We could have a revolution here." The funny thing is, they already did: Stonewall, in 1969, where a collection of white, Latin@ and African American queers, many of whom were in drag, fought back against a police raid of the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, eventually forcing the cops to barricade themselves in the bar. This riot lasted for three days and resulted in the formation of the Gay Liberation Front,

the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, and a new, more militant chapter in the queer rights movement. Harvey Milk was living in New York when this happened; at least one of his former lovers was involved in the riot and in the subsequent political action. It would have been easy, not to mention totally logical, to include this as part of the film. Instead, we have this other protest, where any presence of Latin@s, particularly drag queens, in the revolution is neatly contained. The protest happens in Europe: it relates not to America, but a foreign country. It is a memorial march: it relates not to the future, but the past. The protesters are Spanish: they may be Spanish-speaking, but there is not the same taint of Native American or African American ancestry to stain the whiteness of this moment: it will be marked only by the red of blood, not the brown of subaltern flesh. When this film cannot make a negative example out of queers of color, it erases them.

What is perhaps most troubling about the racism of this film is that it has been ignored, or simply not noticed, in the rush to praise the film, particularly in the wake of the passage of Prop 8. Ann Hornaday of *The Washington Post* called the release of Milk at this moment "a cosmic convergence" (Hornaday) while both Gary Wolcott of *The Tri-City Herald* and Henry Barnes of *The Guardian* offered speculation that the release of the film a month earlier might have changed the tide of Proposition 8. Perhaps it would have; certainly, as Gross pointed out, there were enough white voters who voted for the bill that, had only a fraction of them changed their minds, it would have been defeated. However, if we take look back to the beginning of this chapter and take Savage, Tyler, Flanagan and Schwarz at their words and insist that it is the minority vote that cost gay

people the right to marriage, then I wonder if the film would have had any effect, or perhaps even a negative one. Perhaps, in order to reach those constituencies, another kind of queer liberation story has to be told.

Certainly, this is my prognosis. As I look on the vitriol of white gay writers in the wake of the passage of Prop 8, the ease with which they turned against African Americans as the cause of their suffering even as they usurped their place as the preeminent suffering bodies in the United States, the embracing of brands and stories that hold to a white standard of beauty, the marginalization of people of color within narratives of gay coupling, the stereotypes and erasures that have infected performances of gay history, I hereby determine that the only course of treatment is open resistance against the white heternormative gay assimilationist movement. Certainly, the film *Milk* made me stand up in a movie theatre and say something along the lines of, "Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you have enjoyed the movie, but you all should know that years before Harvey Milk did his work in San Francisco, the gay rights movement began when African American and Latina drag queen threw their shoes and broken bottles at the cops and started the Stonewall riots in 1969. That is the place of Latinos in queer liberation. We have always been at the forefront, and we are more than people you don't have to talk intelligently to." This is not something I had ever done before; as outspoken as I am on an official stage, I was terrified to make this statement in front of a public where I was not authorized to speak, made even more so by my inability to remember the name of one of the most significant leaders of the Stonewall Riots, a transgender Latina. Nevertheless, I was motivated to stand up because of the experience I had just had at Ida, an experience

of moving beyond the narratives of white heteronormative gayness that had excluded me into a world of radical queerness that embraced me for the fat, Latino, frequently feminine, non-normative creature that I am. I realized that to remain silent in the face of the whitewashing of queer history would be a betrayal of all that I had gained, and that is what made me stand up: not simply the suffering I felt watching a Latino be depicted as a stupid slut yet again, but the memory of tremendous joy that I felt compelled to hang onto.

It is for this reason that my prescription for resistance will not be more depictions of suffering, but depictions of joy and triumph over white heteronormativity. My prescription is a performance that will enact my trip to Ida and, in the process, create not just one carnival but multiple carnivals where the audience becomes part of the performance of a world apart from the white heteronormative one, where I and my audience can indulge in the "ambivalent laughter" that pokes fun of all of us even if it invites us in. My prescription is to step into an Ida in miniature that I will create in *Promised Land* in the hopes that the audience will take up the cause of resisting white heteronormativity not because they see suffering that must be ended or avenged, but because they see joy that must be defended, emulated, and indulged.

Chapter 2: Carnivals of the Queered

Carnival of the CampCamped: *Who Wants to Be a Radical Queer Performance Artist?*

Of course, recreating the experience of Ida would be next to impossible: it would require a number of queer performers of various ages, races, body types, and, of course,

genders. It would require an audience more comfortable with troubling these characteristics than I am as a performer (not to mention audience members willing to flirt and have sex with me, something I can only dream about guaranteeing one day), and in such a case, I would be preaching to the choir, something I find boring. Fortunately, I have been trained well: as a performer who cut his teeth at *CampCamp!*, itself inspired by the values and performance practices of Ida, I at least have a sense of how to create a microcosm of Ida in a performance mode: a dance between camp and DIY aesthetics that clears a space for gender play and creates a carnivalesque atmosphere where the audience is called upon to play. This time, though, the audience will play to win, as part of *Who Wants to Be a Radical Queer Performance Artist?* In doing so, the audience will fulfill the first part of my prescription: imagine yourself as a knowing queer audience invested in helping a young Latin@ advance not up the ladder of privilege, but further into the realms of queerness, as he negotiates his privileges as an educated male. Do this at least once, accompanied by laughter.

As I draw from *CampCamp!*'s aesthetic bag of tricks, I get by with a little help from my friends, in this case a voice-over from Sunny Drake, a radical queer, transgender performance artist from Australia who performed twice at *CampCamp!* Sunny's voice, the first of the piece, is heard in the blackout before I am even visible onstage, uttering in a broad version of his own Australian accent, "Heeello! And welcome back to *Who Wants to Be a Radical Queer Performance Artist?* I'm your host, radical queer performance artist Sunny the Duck!" (Ramirez, *PL*). For CampCamp! fans and other familiar with the radical queer performance scene, Sunny's voice acts as a kind of bona

fides for the show: Sunny Drake is someone who knows a thing or two about radical queer performance. Yet these same people would likely realize that Sunny's accent is nowhere near that thick; even those who don't will note the cartoonish quality of the nickname "Sunny the Duck." This self-parody offers a campy rendition of internationally franchised game shows (of which *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* is one of the most famous) that, as in the cases of *The Weakest Link* and *Distraction*, brought foreign hosts to run the American version of the show; even the name, "Sunny the Duck," suggests a host trying too hard to be the clown. This serves to queer the globalization of entertainment and suggests to those audience members unfamiliar with radical queer movements that they such movements are, indeed, a global phenomenon. Those same audience members may also be wondering about the gender of the Duck: Sunny's gender is never given or referred to, and Sunny's voice is very androgynous (Sunny transitioned from female to male over the course of our friendship, and he takes no hormones and makes no attempt to deepen his voice at the time of this writing). It may only be Austin audiences that recognize the *CampCamp!* connection, but this world is built in the dance between camp and DIY. In this world, nationalities are writ large and gender is ambiguous. The hierarchies of male/female and American/foreign are troubled with exaggerated humor, and as queer and straight audiences laugh alongside one another, the dichotomy of laughing with/laughing begins to break down as well: even those laughing out of discomfort will see that they are laughing alongside people familiar with the territory.

DIY arrives in the dialogue: when it comes time to poll the audience, there is no electronic system as in *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*; Sunny says, "Alright folks! We have no budget here on *Who Wants to Be a Radical Queer Performance Artist?*, so we're going to have to do it by applause" (Ramirez, *PL*). The line frequently gets a laugh; there have been, so far, enough people to recognize that not having a budget is part and parcel of radical politics. In this moment, the blending of straight and queer in the audience is taken a step further, as the audience is now assumed to be experts in the field of radical queerness.

In fact, it is radical queerness as juxtaposed against gayness. Shortly after the lights come up, Sunny makes me an offer: "You can walk out of here with all your winnings and begin a career as a gay performance artist. A lot of them out there. Very successful! So the question is: do you want to play it safe, or do you want to play the game?" (Ramirez, *PL*). Here, gayness is associated with success, with safety, and with taking-the-money-and-running: in other words, financial security. It is also, in this case, the less valued term compared to the riskiness, cheapness, and campiness of *Who Wants to Be a Radical Queer Performance Artist?,* projected as it is into the scenario of the game show, where the risk of winning big is always framed as more attractive to the audience than going home with a guaranteed prize. It is with this in mind that the audience, as they hear me say, "I'm going to play the game!" (Ramirez, *PL*) frequently cheer the decision, cheering me away from the world of gayness and into the space where the potential for something greater can be realized. For queers in the audience, this is a valuation of our world; for those who are not queer, it is a chance to slip into the queer

world unnoticed, or to view it with the excitement that one would feel at the prospect of winning the big money.

I am still two questions away, and the first one stumps me. Sunny asks, "What fierce Latina trans-rights activist, who famously uttered the phrase 'Hell hath no fury like a drag queen scorned!' started the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, and is often credited with throwing the first bottle at the cops at the Stonewall Riots in 1969?" (Ramirez, *PL*). For those who noted my name before—or those who know me—this would seem like a gimme: I am myself Latin@, after all. Yet as the question is read I begin to grit my teeth, looking more and more worried as I hear the names: "Is it A) Allison Allante, B) Catiria Reyes, C) Sylvia Rivera or D) Sandra Salinas" (Ramirez, *PL*). All the names are Latin@; when I admit not knowing the name, Sunny asks "Don't any of the names look familiar?" I respond, "I'm a Mexican, Sunny, all the names look familiar!" (Ramirez, *PL*). Race is thrown into relief in this moment both by the question and the answer. It reveals Sunny's own whiteness; someone with very little exposure to Latin@ names would be more likely to find only one of the names familiar. Yet it is also the first moment in which I assert my race, and I do so not in a place of pride, but in a place of embarrassment, a feeling of not having information that I feel I should. For those familiar with the format of the show—indeed, for most people familiar with the scenario of game shows—the questions get harder as they go along, and I have now gone from "doing extremely well so far" to running the risk of being sent home empty-handed.

This failure to remember the name of the Stonewall leader (Sylvia Rivera, in case you were breathless with suspense) is, of course, the same failure I experienced while

watching *Milk*. Truth be told, I had originally written the scene with the question "Who was the first person in the United States to publish an article in favor of queer rights?" The answer was Emma Goldman. The scene was going to be a chance to show erudition that would then get punctured by the final question of the scene; the engagement with *Milk* was going to be saved for the end. It was my director, Bree Perlman, who asked me to simplify the script by having the question be about Sylvia Rivera, who had not appeared in the show up until the *Milk* section at the end. Thank heavens she did: in doing so, the moment becomes one in which the separation between gayness and queerness becomes constituted by a knowledge of race, more specifically constituted by a knowledge of the intimate involvement of working-class, trans people of color to the history of queer liberation. With the scenes of Cleve Jones badmouthing Jack Lira to Anne Kronenberg burned in my mind, I mention that I first learned about "this person" from a friend who has a poster of her on his wall, at which Sunny moans, "And you already used your phone-a-friend lifeline on the vaginal fisting safety question!" (Ramirez, *PL*). Is this a moment when I use the female body to get a laugh? Yes, but I would argue that it is ambivalent laughter: it may be funny to ask a gay man about vaginal safety, but nevertheless, the rules of fisting are very different between anal and vaginal fisting (yet another thing I learned at Ida), and the world that I am creating is insisting that I be able to talk not just about my own sexuality, but the sexuality of others. It marks me a male, but also marks a blind spot in my privilege as male that I have to get over to go on my journey. Having said that, this also serves to underline the importance of racial formation in queerness. As queer as it is to practice and publically speak about

vaginal fisting, as necessary as this knowledge is to be a radical queer performance artist, and as much as the use of the "phone a friend" lifeline suggests that I was able to phone a queer woman friend in order to answer the question, I was also apparently asked this question while still working my way up to "gay performance artist," suggesting that cross-gender allegiances and an awareness with edgy sexual practices does not a queer make without a knowledge of race.

After this staged failure, Sunny offers an alternative: "You still have one lifeline left: poll the audience!" (Ramirez, *PL*). I agree, and at this point I am no longer the one on the spot: it is now the audience who must demonstrate their knowledge of queer history, the dynamic of knowledgeable performer informing the audience about the ways of queerness now reversed, with the audience being called upon to provide knowledge. Each of the answers is read to the audience with space left for applause to follow. I must admit to being somewhat embarrassed by the fact that, so far, they've gotten it every time, letting loose a far greater volume of applause for Sylvia Rivera than any other of the options; am I the dumbest kid in class to not remember her name? Nevertheless, thinking back on the patterns of applause, I cannot help but wonder whether it was truly everyone who knew the correct answer. The first two answers, Allison Allante and Catiria Reyes, were typically greeted with silence; Sandra Salinas, the fourth option, occasionally got a smattering of applause, usually with a laugh. I find it plausible, even probable, that there were a number of people in the audience who were as stumped as I was, perhaps more so due to an even greater lack of familiarity with queer revolutionary history. It is only when there is some applause for Rivera that those unaware of the right

answer have the opportunity to mask their ignorance, to assure those around them that they are indeed knowledgeable about this history. At this moment, even straight people have the opportunity to position themselves on the queer side of the divide, not as a gatekeeper barring my way but as allies showing me a back entrance. As I select the right answer, the cheering of the audience that has helped me makes them part of the queer world of which I am about to become a part. As with the participants of a carnival, even straight people in the audience can have the pleasure of building this world together through cheering, laughter and applause.

There's still one question, though, and I am now out of lifelines; I use this question to stage a moment where my own knowledge as a highly educated individual comes up short, both through the text of the performance and via a reference to another work where the acquisition and deployment of knowledge is held up to critcism. Sunny asks, "How does queer liberation begin?" (Ramirez, *PL*). I wait for the multiple choice options; Sunny insists that this is not multiple choice, slowly letting his accent drop back into a less campy register: we are onto some serious stuff. I insist that, "I was a grad student, Sunny; I really prefer to have the answers in front of me before I start thinking about the question" (Ramirez, *PL*). Sunny only asks the question again, to which I give the half-hearted response "Um . . . It is written?" (Ramirez, *PL*). I finally acknowledge what, perhaps, a lot of audience members had been thinking: that in addition to parodying games shows more generally, I am now taking on *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), the film directed by Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan and written by Simon Beaufoy, based on the novel by *Q & A* by Vikas Swarup.

I reference this film in order to steal from it, to put the audience in mind of the *Slumdog Millionaire*'s own critique of knowledge. The film, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2009 during the writing of this piece, follows Jamal, a working-class Mumbai youth who grew up as a beggar, street-salesman, and thief, as he advances through the questions of India's own version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* It is his class status that makes his rise so unusual; the police officer interrogating him asserts that "Professors, doctors, lawyers . . . never make it past 10,000 rupees. He got to 20 million" (*Slumdog Millionaire*). Formal education, however, is neither the only means towards knowledge: the film reveals the means by which Jamal, through his life experiences, acquired information despite his lack of formal education. In each instance, the knowledge has an emotional valence, whether it is a friend, blinded to make him a more profitable beggar, remarking that it is Benjamin Franklin on the $100 bill or the image of Rama burned into his mind as his mother becomes a victim of Hindi sectarian violence. Not only is the means of acquiring knowledge called into question, but the valuation of knowledge as well. In the second question of the show, he requires the audience's aid to determine what is written beneath the national emblem of India, whether it is truth, lies, fashion or money that "alone triumphs" (*Slumdog*). His lack of formal education keeps him from knowing the answer, yet I, who am not Indian, would have easily guessed the answer, being familiar with nationalist propaganda. Certainly, the interrogating police officer insists that even his five-year-old daughter would know the answer. Jamal counters by asking about the price of food at a local stand, and "Who stole Constable Verma's bicycle out of Santa Cruz station last Thursday?" When the officer

asks, "You know who that was?" Jamal responds, "Everyone in Juhu knows that, even five-year-olds" (*Slumdog*). The film makes it clear that one person's mystery is another's common knowledge, and what distinguishes those people from one another is often class, caste and education.

I chose to make this reference not simply because it was topical, but to bring these hierarchies of class and education into the realm of queer subversion. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner claims that "most of the imaginative energies of queer culture have come to be focused on a rigorously anti-assimilationist rhetoric invoked only in non-state public sphere context such as Modern Language Association panels" (Warner 212). I think that Warner's tongue is in cheek with this statement; nevertheless, I call into question whether a Modern Language Association panel is, in fact, a place to find queer consciousness. Academia is built on hierarchy: it is a middle-class profession that requires years of research—often at low pay—to enter into the field. Compare this to the DIY world of *CampCamp!*, whose performance aesthetic insist on showing that queerness and fabulousness are available to anyone willing to make glitter out of recycled materials, an aesthetic available even to those with low paying jobs (graduate students included: Rayna Matthews was in graduate school when she began the project). In order to enter the carnival world of queerness, I must finally offer my own ambivalent laughter at the academic world that has enabled me to know about queer history, hopefully inspiring others to the same ambivalent laughter, joking at their privilege as well as my own.

Carnival of the Sprinkled: Communion

"I learned that with love, sex and art, life is really, really sweet, and you can just get through anything. Even death."—Annie Sprinkle, Exposed: Experiments in Love Sex Death and Art

Few performances that I witnessed before I became a performance artist myself affected me quite so deeply as Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens's *Exposed: Experiments in Love, Sex, Death and Art*. I was attending a graduate program in English at the University of California, Berkeley, and was miserable. I had seen the advertisements for the show and had asked a number of people to go with me. When I explained that Annie Sprinkle was a porn star and sex worker turned feminist sex-positive performance artist, the reactions ranged from dismissive to horrified, so I, in a terrible mood, went alone. Two hours later, I was practically dancing through the San Francisco streets. I had witnesses a performance that had filled me with love, with sensuality, with creative force. When it came time for me to do *Promised Land*, I knew I wanted to create the same feeling that Sprinkle and Stephens created with theirs. If the first dose in my prescription involves laughter, the second involves celebration, the enjoyment of bodies: take a bite of chips and salsa and listen as someone tells you how cute you are.

I thought back to two aspects of the performance that bookend the piece. Each of these involves audience participation. At the beginning of the piece, Sprinkle and Stephens come out and address the audience. "Welcome, everyone, to the Love Art Laboratory" (*Exposed*). Although they will later don lab coats—and, indeed their assistants for the piece are already in lab coats and have been interacting with the audience, asking them to write down definitions of love, sex, death and art—Sprinkle and

Stephens arrive glittering, Stephens in a glittering black button-down shirt, Sprinkle in a long black dress covered with sequined silver flowers that, unsurprisingly, reveals much of her famously ample bosom. Bosoms, it turns out, are on the brain for these two: they ask the audience if they would like to collaborate on an art project, and when the audience responds with a general affirmation, they ask if anyone, regardless of gender, would be willing to have polaroids taken of their naked breasts. That these are polaroids, rather than digital cameras photos, is important: they are not as easily reproducible images, and the polaroid speaks to something tawdry, something from the late 70s/early 80s heyday of porn when Sprinkle first became famous. As opposed to the *Girls Gone Wild* videos that encourage women to show their breasts, these images will not be sold, and perform their own low-fi seediness openly, a bit of DIY pornography. The performance is now a carnal carnival of sorts, one in which the spectators have now become participants, where the footlights are still on but shine on all bodies willing to expose themselves, willing to join in the fun. As Sprinkle and Stephens perform the eroticism of the experience, they compliment and sexually coo over each exposed chest, male or female; at one point in their video documentation, Stephens declares "I think I'm going to have an orgasm!" (*Exposed*) as she takes snapshots of people of all ages, genders and body parts. In effect, Sprinkle and Stephens have turned their willing audience members into porn stars, and everyone who chooses gets to have the experience of being objectified and desired not for the extent to which they conform to a normative breast, but because of their breasts' unique eroticism.

This appreciation of the unique, bodily beauty of each audience member carries over to the end of the show. Sprinkle and Stephens invite the audience to partake of an elixir with them. The elixir in question contains essences of red and orange chakras (orange juice and some other red liquid), pearls of ecstasy (grapes), and a number of other ingredients that run the gamut between the sacred and the salacious, including, they claim, a pubic hair. They drink their drinks first, which prompts them to tell each other what they love about one another, and as they invite the audience to come get their own cups for a group toast, they turn the love that they feel for each other out to the audience, telling each person "Something I love about you is . . ." (*Exposed*). They managed to come up with something for everyone, whether it was a compliment on their personal styles or the beauty of their smiles. In my case, I had earlier participated in a dance contest to see who could be the best booty shaker: I won. As Stephens handed me my cup of elixir, she said, "Something I love about you is the way you shake your booty." To be loved for my body, for the way it moves: how utterly wonderful for a young man feeling illegible in the white homonormative world of San Francisco. The drink itself didn't taste very good. The experience was unbelievably delicious.

This feeling of being desired, of someone finding pleasure in viewing my non-normative body, in watching and feeling it move, was something I wanted to recreate, in no small part because Ida was another place in which I felt the powerful pleasure and liberatory potential of being desired. As I was creating the show, I felt what was significant about these experiences was the sensual and ritual power of consuming something together not in an atmosphere of solemnity, but of mirth, and the joy of being

complimented by a performer whom one has ostensibly come to applaud; as I realized later, the carnivalesque elements of the piece. Having already incorporated religious themes into Promised Land through the character of a preacher proselytizing radical queerness, I chose to offer the audience a communion, although instead of wine and wafers, I would offer chips and salsa, a dish I had made at a party on my first Ida trip in an effort to contribute, to pay back the generosity with which I had been received. I paid for the ingredients myself and prepared the salsa from scratch. It was a big hit, and it became part of my personal mythology about the piece: I firmly believe that I have to make salsa, give something of myself, to make the magic of Ida work.

In performance, I make the salsa when I return to Ida from a trip to the grocery store, after I had evaded the forces of the Eye of Abercrombie and chose to make a real effort to connect to the community that I had found myself in, flush toilets or not. I say,

> My mother--who found time to cook with me even as she ran a major university, thank you very much--taught me to make salsa, and so making it bring out the Mexican in me, to steal a bit from Sandra Cisneros. *Cebollas, cilantro, y tomates* bring out the generous heart in me, the *mira que* skinny, you need to eat more in me, the my mother's mother's mother letting the poor into her kitchen in me, *pero el ajo, y los chiles*, well, they wake up the *maldita bruja* in me, the shake your hips while chopping in me, the my father's mother rubbed me with an egg to take off the evil eye when I was a baby in me, and yes, that's right, the Latin slut who will steal your man in me. And the canned tomatoes and the food processor, well, they bring out the clean your own damn house, *pinche gringo* in me (Ramirez, *PL*).

This passage, as I say in the show, steals from Sandra Cisneros's poem "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me," a poem written to a lover which elaborates on all the ways in which the lover causes Cisneros to feel a connection to various stereotypes and images of being Mexican that inhabit her: "the Dolores Del Rio/ Mexican spit-fire in me" and "The

barbacoa taquitos in me" as much as "The Aztec love of war in me" and "The stand-back-white-bitch" (*Cisneros*) in me. While these many identifications have positive and negative valences, what is ultimately most empowering is the negative: "I am evil./ I am the swallower of sins./ I am the lust goddess without guilt" (*Cisneros*). Cisneros's speaker disidentifies with the stereotypes of lust and violence, turning them into sources of strength and fuel for the fire of intimacy; that the gender of the love-object is never given suggests that this intimacy is potentially, if not always already, queer.

Without a lover there, I have to bring the (queer) Mexican in me out myself, through cooking. Because I am aware that my audience has a lot of non-Mexicans out there, I feel the need to contain stereotypical assumptions: yes, I learned to make salsa from my mother, but she was a career woman at the top of her profession when she did so. I bring out an onion, a bunch of cilantro, and two tomatoes: I am performing an act of education in Spanish as I go. I begin with the positive associations, most particularly generosity, linking it to the very excess of body that has shut me out of the white homonormativity: if I am heavy, part of that is because generous Latin@ relatives have insisted that I am too skinny, that I need to look "bien-cuidado." This generosity, particularly around food, has a political valence: the giving of food to the poor. Positive affects, though, are just some of the ingredients in making my salsa-self: garlic and jalapeño peppers, with their strong flavors and potential to stink-up the breath, bring in the negative ones, the sexual ones, most importantly the "Latin slut who will steal your man in me." Like Cisneros, I choose to reincorporate the negative stereotype as a source of power.

That this happens in a moment of emulating Annie Sprinkle is no coincidence either: in the foreward to *Hardcore from the Heart: The Pleasures, Profits and Politics of Sex in Performance*, Rebecca Schneider writes that, for Annie Sprinkle, embracing the word "whore" is a powerful act. "If the name 'whore,' like the words 'queer' or 'nigger' or 'spic' has been as effectively deployed as an injurious appellation, Sprinkle is engaged in flipping that injury back against the historical force of its deployment. By greeting the injurious hailing with a hearty, 'Yes! It's me!' she strategically confounds the hailing" (Schneider ix). In the space of the gaystream, the hailing as a Latin slut shuts me down and sends me out of the store; to create the space of queerness, I have to engage with my racial and sexual identity, and in doing so, I choose to inhabit the persona of the slut, to allow myself to be interpellated with a sly grin not dissimilar to Topsy's, to answer the hail this time with the knowledge that it has the potential to intimidate and, more deliciously, turn on.

The performance of race and sexuality, however, cannot all be fun and games. As I serve the salsa, I point out that it is made from corn, which was here "long before this land was colonized by violence and disease, a genocide so unspeakable that you forget it at the risk of your soul." Here, the very term "Promised Land" is revealed for what it always has been: a promise that is contingent on the taking of land that belongs to someone else. The consumption of chips and salsa—made from a number of plants indigenous to the Americas—is recast as a remembrance of Native American genocide. These chips and salsa must be eaten to honor "the ones who once called the Promised Land their own, the blood that took it, and the people who reappropriated it" (Ramirez,

PL). The audience must recognize that this place is built on stolen land, just as the theatre they are standing in is, and therefore the act of communion, of performing togetherness by the communal consumption of food, must acknowledge that history. The "reappropriation" suggests an alternative to simple mourning: the "reappropriation" as "re-stealing" implies that this land can be used to serve goals other than the hegemonic colonial ones that stole it in the first place.

In the meantime, time to eat. As each audience member comes to take communion, I feed each one directly, like a priest. I don't say "The body of Christ, the bread of heaven," though. I say to the first person, "You're really cute, by the way" (Ramirez, *PL*). This gets a laugh; I am taking time out of the ritual to flirt. Turns out, though, that flirting is the ritual: I tell everyone, "You're really cute, by the way," doing my best to make eye contact and find something about the person I am serving that I do indeed find cute. The relative uniformity compared to Sprinkle and Stephens' unique compliments is due partly to time, partly to make sure that no one person feels more desired than another. The audience steps onto the stage for a small party, as Dave End's ". . . And by Queen" turns into Climbing Poetree's "between us," a celebration of the sexual and spiritual love between two women of color. The audience members are now performers, blessed and united by food designed to bring out the Latin slut in everyone, a celebration of sexualized queerness. The audience has stepped into the footlights, and a carnival, albeit a small one, is underway.

Carnival of the Self: An Ode to Sylvia Rivera

Climbing Poetree's inclusion in the party is not the only way in which their work has permeated the show; their slam poems provide the inspiration for the coda of the piece. As I am saying goodbye to the audience, telling them that I am on a mission to find "a posse . . . a tribe . . . a Justice League of Radical Queer Men" (Ramirez, *PL*), that I am actively seeking people looking for a place like the Promised Land, that "I guess that's it," a voice says "Oh, that ain't it!" (Ramirez, *PL*). I am evidently mistaken in my mission, or, at the very least, have left something out. She insists that "You can't take your vacation in the Promised Land without paying it back" (Ramirez, *PL*) The voice belongs to Yana Reyes, an Afro-Latina trans-rights activist whom I mention earlier in the show, but she is not playing herself. When I ask who she is, she says, "The name's Sylvia Rivera, and don't you forget it" (Ramirez, *PL*). I sheepishly admit that I have forgotten, and after she reminds me that "Hell hath no fury like a drag queen scorned" (Ramirez, *PL*), I launch into a six-minute slam poem, promising to never forget her again, in order to offer the final dose of my prescription: watch a queer, Latin@, able-bodied, well-educated cisgender man refashion himself for the world, in hopes that it provides some inspiration.

I begin with the cry "I'm not missing a minute of this! It's the revolution!" (Ramirez, *PL*). This is quote, taken from Martin Duberman's *Stonewall*, is Rivera's cry on the night of Stonewall, a night that united her with "Allison, Cristine, Yvonna and Ivan . . . Terry and Danny and Jerry and so many others" (Ramirez, *PL*). I then give a biography of her work from Stonewall on, as she "girded her loins and gave birth to a STAR: the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries" (Ramirez, *PL*). Sylvia Rivera's

own political activism allows for the transgender woman to give birth, in this case to an organization specifically oriented towards the rights of at-risk youth: STAR was devoted to raising money so that queer youth who were living on the streets would have a shelter. Rivera broke with the Gay Liberation Front when it became the Gay Activist Alliance and, in its new platform, offered no language to promote the rights and safety of drag queen and transsexuals. It is here that I say "And that is when you uttered the words that even today make the Log Cabins tremble and the closets crack open: Hell hath no fury like a drag queen scorned!" (Ramirez, *PL*). "Log Cabins" refers to the Log Cabin Republicans, the gay members of the Republican party, suggesting that even today the cry of a drag queen would make such assimilationists tremble. However, Sylvia is not the only one crying out: I pause my own litany with, "Say it with me people: Hell hath no fury like a drag queen scorned!" (Ramirez, *PL*). As with the applause that unified the audience around her name in the beginning of the show, I call on everyone to perform her very words, to no longer be united simply in knowledge (feigned or otherwise) about Rivera, but in her defiant drag queen ethos as well.

This outcry on the part of the audience has a kinship in my own outburst: "I was in a movie theatre watching a whitewash, but what do you expect when you call a movie 'Milk?'" (Ramirez, *PL*). As I relate the racist actions and omissions of the film, I insist that "I could not sit with the memory of a man's lips on mine in the Promised Land without telling them about you. But Sylvia, I could not remember your name" (Ramirez, *PL*). It is here that the attentive audience member realizes that the failure at the beginning of the show was a real one, that I was caught out in the real world as a radical queer with

an inadequate grasp of history. Nevertheless, I relate how I stood up in the theater, and then insist "I will not forget your name, Sylvia. Your name is mixed in with my salsa, written in the trees on the mountainside, and whispered by my lover on the trunk of his car" (Ramirez, *PL*). Sylvia is now implicated not only in the beginning of my show, but throughout it, and the audience discovers that they have even ingested her by eating the salsa. I assert that it is Sylvia to whom I owe my freedom, and in payment, I end the show with by responding to the question that began it:

> How does queer liberation begin? It begins, like all good things, with really great sex. It begins with standing up and speaking when you know something is wrong. It begins here, there and every day, fighting against the goliaths of oppression and disease. It is a black gospel choir on the Trans Day of Remembrance singing 'I love you. You are important to me. I need you to survive.' It is Sylvia. It is Sunny. It is Silky and Ray and the queers of Austin. It is MaxZine and Spree and Tomfoolery and all those who built the Promised Land, and it is Anais and Conrad and Becca Raeleen and all those who have kept it going. It my family. It is my friends. It is me. It is you. It is all of the above (Ramirez, *PL*).

As the performance draws to a close, I offer a microcosm of the whole. Like carnival, queer liberation is blatantly sexual, requiring not just sex but "really good sex" to be born, suggesting that liberation takes the place of reproduction in queer sexuality. It is also constituted by acts of resistance. It is racialized not as white, but as including an alliance between African American religious music and the defense of transgender lives. It is made up of all the characters I have described in the story, as well as all those who performed voice-overs for the piece. Most importantly, it is made up of the audience themselves. I insist that they are enactors of queer liberation as much as I am. Just as they have participated in the feasting and laughter, so too can they pay it back outside the theater.

This poem is not delivered somberly. It is delivered with joy, and not just any joy, but the joy of Christmas: I am dressed in an elf-costume that I had originally worn to host a burlesque Christmas show, with thigh high red and white striped stockings, green shorts, and a red and white woman's top. Much to my surprise, this outfit helps me to one of the most memorable make-out sessions of my life. Earlier in the performance, I am having a conversation with a man to whom I am very attracted. I tell him, in voice-over, that I have the costume in my car; in front of the audience, I curse my disembodied voice for revealing that I might be anything less than a masculinist fantasy. I am shut up by another voice, the voice of the man in question: "Can you go put it on?" (Ramirez, *PL*). I am no longer in the world of gayness that demands a recognizable outfit from Gay Identities 'r' Us to be desirable; instead, there is nothing like a campy costume revealing my fat, queer, Latin@ body to give me a chance to ask him to walk me to my car, leading to a kiss to build a queer dream on. However, I do not reveal the costume in the moment; it is only after I talk about losing track of this man and deciding to stay at the party and continue having the time of my life—blowing off the loss of "the handsome prince" as "a stupid, heternormative story anyway" (Ramirez, *PL*)—that I strip off my pants and shirt to reveal the naughty elf underneath. The outfit is therefore marked (though not stained) with queer desire and, yes, queer liberation not just from the white homonormative standards of beauty and desirable performance but from the heteronormative fantasies by which these standards are enforced. I am, however, lacking footwear: as I ask "How does queer liberation begin?" (Ramirez, *PL*), I pull out and pull on a pair of very cheap, tacky clear heels, which I then use to stomp out a march rhythm on the floor as I offer my

answer. The carnival is clearly not over; the disrupted hierarchies must become a part of politics, regardless of whether my sexualized Christmas attire and low-rent stripper heels prove to be "telegenic" or not. If I owe Sylvia Rivera my freedom, then my performance in the political sphere must echo the defiant drag queen and cite her visually.

This conscious self-fashioning falls in line with Muñoz's adaptation of Michel Foucault's notion of "the care of the self." Muñoz draws upon Foucault's claim that this self care is used "'to describe agricultural management. The responsibility of a monarch to his people . . . That which a doctor does in the course of caring for a patient . . . it describes a sort of work, an activity; it implies attention, knowledge, technique'" (Muñoz 144). This self-care has obvious political dimensions, which Muñoz expands upon through George Yúdice's analysis of Rigoberta Menchu, transforming what he sees as an aesthetic practice for Foucault into "an ethics in which practical politics plays a central role . . . in which the 'self' is practiced in solidarity with others struggling for survival" (145). Muñoz claims that he is "disidentifying with Foucault's paradigm insofar as I am redeploying it and, to a certain extent, restructuring it in the service of minoritarian identity" (145). Muñoz's disidentification is based on the insistence that minority subjects must perform disidentification: "to work on oneself is to veer away from the models of the self that correlate with socially prescribed identity narratives . . . resisting dominant modes of subjectivity entails not only contesting dominant modalities of governmental and state power but also opening up a space for new social formations" (145).

The self I perform at the end of this show is a self for others: a self for Sylvia Rivera, a self for the people of Ida and the radical queers who brought me to it, and, most

saliently, a self for the audience. I offer myself as a model, not of someone who is able to cite queer history perfectly at the drop of the hat, but one who does not let that stop him from intervening in a racist project of gay assimilation, whether that be by standing up in a movie theater or dressing up in clear heels and peppermint-striped stockings (ideally, of course, it would be both at once), or even asserting that I do not need the comfort of a stable, monogamous relationship (sanctified as marriage or otherwise) to see myself as valuable. I do not do this in seriousness; in fact, I do so looking absolutely ridiculous, defiantly asserting that revolutionary action is not simply possible in this outfit, but enacted by this outfit. I am, in short, a one-man carnival: laughing at hierarchy, inviting others to live and laugh with me, insisting that in doing so, they can fight alongside me.

I have to admit something here: it doesn't always work. My prescription is far from perfect. Some experience harmful side effects: there are those who have been offended by the jokes that, in my mind, were purely directed at myself, and I am in the process of adapting the show to address some, but not all, of these concerns. Some do not find that the prescription has the proper effect: there are those who leave the show with no memory of Sylvia Rivera. People will see what they want to see; one person claimed that my show was all about how I was vegetarian, and I am still not sure how much she was joking. Nevertheless, I have also followed up with some of the people in my audience and found that my prescription has done some good: a friend told me that his young cousin had seen the show, and that it resulted in a weekend spent examining her gender, questioning whether the word "woman" fit her after all. I can therefore claim that at least one person took my medicine with a spoonful of sugar and carried the carnival

with her—or him, whatever this person may decide—and is, even as I write, imagining a new way of being in the world.

Conclusion: Utopia and The Birth of Olivia Cruz

Have I just performed a utopia? I am not sure; truth be told, I'm worried about it. Certainly, there are those who might, if they enjoyed the piece, describe my performance in Jill Dolan's terms as "a utopian performative which, in her words, describes "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be life if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (Dolan 5). As lovely as this notion is, I am worried about "utopia" as both a perfect place and a nowhere place: if it is so perfect as to never exist, then how do we work towards it in ways that exceed a moment in performance—one that is never guaranteed to reach an entire audience, as the responses to *Promised Land* indicate—and that enter into them realm of social action? It is perhaps for this reason that I am quick to emphasize that the Promised Land is a real place: Ida exists and, while it may not be perfect, it provides a viable alternative to the white heteronormative world of mainstream gay culture. In fact, its very lack of perfection is what allows it to remain an open space, changing with the needs of its residents and the visitors who play in it, love it and literally build it a week-long, annual work party. If Ida were perfect, it would have no need for this reciprocal relationship with its visitor. Instead, Ida insists on its imperfection, its contingency and its dependence on a larger radical queer community that desperately needs this place *to exist right now*. It is also

why I included the coda: in order for places like Ida to be meaningful outside their borders, we need to fight to create a better, if not perfect, world.

Another flaw of Dolan's formulation of the utopian performative is that it is completely out of my control. As an artist, I cannot know whether I have created a utopia for my audience, if I wanted to or not. However, I can create a utopia for myself, one that, unlike Ida itself, I can carry with me wherever I go. Rather than a utopian world, I am more comfortable with the idea that Ida, like the theater, provides a space where we can imagine, and even perform, a utopian self. It was at a work party for Ida where Olivia Cruz was born. There was a competition one night to see who could be the gayest of them all; I had not planned on entering, but that same evening I had a conversation with a friend who said, "What I love about Ida is that you get to see people at their most free." I took those words to heart and went out in shorts and a pink-and-silver glittering scarf, worn around my head like the veil of La Virgen de Guadalupe. When it came time for the competition, I introduced myself as Olivia Cruz, a pun on the lesbian cruise line Olivia Cruises (when I announced my name, someone shouted from the audience, "You win!"), and then . . . well, sometimes what happens at Ida stays at Ida. I will say that I never wore the scarf again.

Olivia is brought more fully to life in *Footnotes for People Who Don't Speak Spanish*, my upcoming performance that I wrote in conversation with Beliza Torres Narvaez, who co-stars with me. The genesis of this performance came from the same Race and Performance class that started this show, in this case our viewing of *Couple in a Cage*, the video documentation of Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Coco Fusco's "Two

Undiscovered Amerindians." The central controversy of this piece is what many see as an act of deceit perpetrated by Gomez-Peña and Fusco during a tour in which the duo chose to do a performance that cited and parodied the long history of "authentic" African or American natives being exhibited by museums, side shows, and other venues controlled by white folk. Calling the piece "Two Undiscovered Amerindians," they invented a fictional island off the coast of Mexico where the "Guatinauis" were found and provided a fake map; assistants dressed as museum docents were there to instruct people on the Guatinauis. Complicating this illusion—indeed, to the point where one wonders how so many people could indeed be so easily fooled—is the dress of these two natives, which includes a backwards baseball cap for Fusco and a wrestling mask for Gomez-Peña, and the "native activities" that they were doing, which included working on a laptop, watching television, and dancing in a hip-hop style to modern music. Nevertheless, many believed that the two artists were indeed Guatinauis, many only to discover the truth later, causing the artists as being perceived, according to Fusco, "as either noble savages or evil tricksters, dissimulators who discredit museums and betray public trust" (Fusco 155).

While not evil, there is a bit of the trickster in Fusco and Gomez-Peña's performance, a touch of disingenuousness evident when Fusco claims that the two artists chose "to take a symbolic vow of silence with the cage performance, a radical departure from Guillermo's previous monologue work and my activities as a writer and public speaker" (145). What Fusco forgets is that Gomez-Peña has a monologue; the audience could call on Gomez-Peña at any time to "tell authentic Amerindian stories (in a nonsensical language)" (145). If one is to judge by the video documentation, *The Couple*

in the Cage (1993), this description is not entirely accurate: Gomez-Peña's speech is not simply unintelligible glossolalia but includes a litany of Spanish place names such as San Antonio or Tijuana rattled off at high speed. This is a clear signal to Spanish-speakers in the audience—whether Latin@ or not—that these are not "authentic Amerindians" at all. It is not only Spanish-speakers to whom Gomez-Peña offers a hint; he throws in the word "Ionesco" to his "Guatinaui" monologue, a reference to acclaimed playwright Eugene Ionesco that acts as a signal to anyone with a background in avant-garde theatre that this is indeed a self-conscious performance on the part of the "Guatinauis." It is clear, therefore, that Gomez-Peña and Fusco were willing to maintain the illusion for some and not for others, privileging those whom they would see as allies.

To be clear, I have no problem with this move—I have thrown in little shout-outs to friends at many a performance—but I do think it complicates Fusco and Gomez-Peña's critiques of the audiences that saw them. As she recounts in *The Archive and the Repetoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Diana Taylor asked Gomez-Peña directly "what his ideal spectator would have done;" he replied "'Open the cage and let us out'" (Taylor 73). This statement implies that the spectator in question believes in the authenticity of the performance—as Taylor points out, "The prohibition against uninvited intervention comes specifically from the piece's artistic nature" (73)—a belief Gomez-Peña was clearly willing to dispel for some audience members (perhaps because he didn't want to face the possibility of allies failing to set him free). Taylor identifies a similar frustration with playing into the performance in Fusco when Fusco says that, "even those who saw our performance as art rather than artifact appeared to take great

pleasure in engaging in the fiction, by paying money to see us enact completely nonsensical or humiliating tasks" (Fusco 154).

Methinks the Guatinaui doth protest too much: I would argue that Fusco herself indulges in the pleasure of engaging in the fiction, with the help of spectators who may not conform to Gomez-Peña's ideal spectator but who nevertheless activate the scenario in different ways. At the exhibit at the Whitney Museum, whom do we find by the cage but our old friend Annie Sprinkle. Not just our old friend; it is difficult to imagine that a performance artist and scholar of Coco Fusco's caliber wouldn't know the iconic redhead on sight, if not personally. Sprinkle steps up to the cage and turns around, exposing her back to the faux-natives, and poses for pictures. Coco Fusco reaches through the bars and begins playing with Sprinkle's hair; there is a smile readable on Fusco's face, and although Sprinkle likely cannot see the smile, she takes the cue and begins miming (a probably not entirely feigned) ecstasy, rolling her head into Fusco's stroking fingers. Just like that, the curiosities in the cage get queered. On the one hand, this is another wink at the crowd in the style of Gomez-Peña's "Ionesco" line, and perhaps the most disruptive to the illusion of confinement, as Fusco and the famously exhibitionist Sprinkle send a signal to the audience that it is okay to take pleasure in this experience, that in fact Fusco is taking pleasure in the experience herself, and that they, as audience members, also have the opportunity to act as performers. Yet as much as Fusco lets herself gave a Mona Lisa smile as the white woman writhes beneath her fingertips, she does not openly acknowledge that she knows or knows of Annie Sprinkle, maintaining the silence of the Guatinauis the entire time. In doing so, Fusco reads back desire, even lesbian desire, into

the women who have stood in cages for centuries, reminding the audience that these women were sexual subjects, just as capable of desiring the women watching them as they were capable of judging them for choosing to indulge in such an exhibition. The history of the exhibited women now adds the element of thwarted desire; by reveling in the pleasures that can only come between two friends or colleagues co-creating an erotic performance, Fusco and Sprinkle offer a tacit reminder of just how impossible those pleasures were for couples in cages, particularly when male-female couples did not happen to share a heterosexual desire.

As should be clear by now, I am a great lover of pleasure, and it is this moment of pleasure, when the artist gets to step into a scenario that might otherwise oppress them and find spaces of camaraderie with the audience through winks and inside jokes, as well as spaces of sensual encounter, that I try to bring into *Footnotes* with the introduction of Olivia Cruz. As I am quick to admit, Olivia is my own version of Carmelita Tropicana, perhaps the most prominent performance persona of playwright and performance artist Alina Troyano. As Muñoz describes Troyano in performance, she "barrels onto the stage. She is wearing a blue wig, a tight red plastic bodice with fringes, black leggings, and leopard print cowboy boots. She spots a woman with a hat and, in her thick pseudo-accent, she purrs that the hat is very sexy and very becoming" (Muñoz xii). She is lavish in her dress, shameless in her sexuality, and always speaking in a voice that reminds the audience that this camp style is not racially neutral. She is, as Muñoz points out later in the same book, the embodiment of *chusmeria*, which describes "a form of behavior that refuses standards of bourgeois comportment . . . it may be a barely veiled racial slur . . . it

sometimes connotes gender nonconformity . . . the epithet *chusma* also connotes recent immigration . . . excessive and flagrant . . . there is something monstrous about the *chusma*" (182). A number of these definitions—particularly those that resist standards of gendered behavior—also describe the queer, but the racial and nationalist valences show that this overlap is far from perfect. Nevertheless, it is this very imperfection that allows the play to speak to multiple audiences. Muñoz claims that "Performers of color . . . often feel the need to define themselves against the overarching whiteness of 'queer.' *Chusmeria* becomes a mode of articulating *a queer world* . . . *Chusmeria* provides Carmelita and her collaborators an occasion to speak queer *and* beyond" (195). By reveling in the overlapping space, Tropicana can elide the whiteness of queer—a whiteness that, I have argued in this essay, is far more open to blending with other colors than the whiteness of gay—and draw a connection between the oppressions of Latin@ and queer culture. If a white heteronormative world excludes people of color and queers, then a queer chusma world invites in both.

It is this world that Olivia lives in and revels in. Not only does she not conform to either gender, she is "excessive and flagrant" in her failure to do so. She comes onstage in a full skirt and a crop top: the belly that bulges out from all sides is white and hairy; the feminizing curves of fat are masculinized by hair, and while the combination of the two certainly has no place on billboard (unless as a before picture), Olivia exposes it with pride. Speaking of hairy, my beard is still in place: Olivia defies the conventions of drag that demand that its practitioners perform a perfect femininity, or even an androgyny, that would require me not just to shave, but likely to lose weight: there is no doubt that I am a

man in a dress. At the top of my head is a Carmen Miranda-style hat that replaces tropical fruit with tomatoes, onions, peppers and cilantro: the ingredients of salsa. This is the Latina performer rendered "monstrous," and yet I enter dancing, being announced as "A goddess, an iconoclast, an anarquistador, a cheap ass faggot, La Verguenza de San Antonio and the Bitch in the Feathers," to which I respond, in a pseudo-accent all my own, "And that's just what they call me in bed" (Ramirez, *Footnotes*). My sexuality is as excessive as every other aspect of my performance, and once again, deeply entrenched in my Latinidad. I am, in short, grotesque, and as such, according to Bakhtin, I am able to "degrade, to bring down to earth," my own Latinidad, "to turn [the] subject into [my] flesh" (Bakhtin 20).

As Angela Stukator contends in "It's not over until the fat lady sings": Comedy, the Carnivalesque, and Body Politics" (2001), the fat female and the Bakhtinian grotesque have a lot in common: "She is constructed as disgusting and delightful, attractive and repulsive, normal and deviant. Yet that initial ambivalence is invariably replaced and resolved by hegemonic certainties. Her power is aborted or neutralized by privileging the pervasive (patriarchal) discourse of female denial" (Stukator 202). That's sad if its true, but what happens when it's a drag queen? Stukator points to Divine's performances as Edna Turnblad and Arvin Hodgepile in *Hairspray* as one that "flaunts the masquerade of both normative masculinity and femininity in her gross, excessive physical appearance and her outrageous performance of archetypes . . . going beyond a critique that returns to the categories of male and female and towards a new and mobile notion of gender identity" (209). It turns out that one of the best ways to retain the

revolutionary potential of the grotesque body is "by appropriating the sensibilities of camp" (210). I think I've got that covered: with *chusmeria* in one hand and queer camp in the other, Olivia Cruz insists that no identity—racial, sexual, or gendered—is even in the neighborhood of certainty. After all, how can we talk about one of these identities without talking about all the other's: for Olivia Cruz, the co-constitutionality of all her identities makes them elusive, unable to pin down into rigid categories, hard to see under the flash of glitter.

Cruz's mysterious origins degrade—in the best sense—the spiritual and mythological origins of Latinidad. In her far reaching scope, Cruz has much in common with Diana Taylor's depiction of Walter Mercado, an astrologer on Univision's *Primer Impacto*. Walter is extravagantly dressed, so much show as to draw comparison in Taylor's essay both to drag queens and Catholic priests. His mythological musings steal shamelessly from global cultures. For Taylor, this very excessiveness and multiple citationality allows Walter to exceed the limitations typically placed on Latin@s in the United States: the idea that we must choose between our American and Latin American heritages. We find Walter

> exuberantly navigating the both/and: both male and female, both white and Latino, both wealthy and 'of the people,' both Spanish- and English-speaking . . . My pleasure in his performance allows me to forget that his ability to navigate those spaces is predicated on his privileged status of white, wealthy male. . . . On one level, then, he simply supports the existing structure of visibility. . . . On another level, I like to believe (or make-believe), Walter's biculturality still poses a challenge to normativity. As politicians and commentators such as Pat Buchanan and Linda Chavez bemoan, Latino/as often eschew the either/or (Taylor 124).

Taylor cannot deny that Walter is able to be all these things precisely because of his white privilege and wealth, but if it is only poor and the noticeably raced as people of color who can challenge normativity, then the battle is going to be harder than we thought. Walter may be in a position of privilege, but he performs it to such excess that it becomes a parody of itself. "Walter's exuberant display of wealth and success is so transparent its funny. It makes visible *as fantasy* the aspiration of making it in a country that values whiteness, stardom and material success. . . . this performance is about 'us' as participants in this fantasy" (128). Like carnival, the laughter here is once again ambivalent. Walter may be queer as a three-dollar bill, but he is also white, and performs privilege to hilarious excess. We laugh not because of our distance from Walter, but because of our proximity, because he is a part of our world.

Like Walter, Olivia Cruz borrows from multiple mythologies, but she queers each and every one of them, degrading them to the same level of flesh that she occupies. First, she is the child of a gay male union. "When Jesus Christ came to the Americas in the time before Columbus, he had a brief romantic relationship with Quetzalcoatl in the Gulf of Mexico, and from their love spilled in the womb of the sea there rose OLIVIA CRUZ!" (Ramirez, *Footnotes*). The birth from the sea invokes Aphrodite, bringing out the Greco-Roman aspects of colonial culture along with the Judeo-Christian, while at the same time positing a fat, hairy drag queen as a Latin American goddess of love. Olivia assures us of the truth of this statement: "It's in the Book of Mormon, people. Look it up" (Ramirez, *Footnotes*). Not content to dirty Catholicism and indigenous culture, Olivia places gay sex in the context of the very religion that worked so hard to promote

Proposition 8. Next, she's the daughter of a lesbian encounter, as the voice continues, "OLIVIA CRUZ was conceived by La Llorona and La Malinche during the coffee break of a very long group therapy session" (Ramirez, *Footnotes*). This is, I must admit, a bit of snark directed at those Latin@ theorists—Gloria Anzaldua in particular—who fetishize La Malinche as the original debased Latina: maybe all she needs is a good woman. Olivia certainly agrees; she says, "She wasn't crying after that!" (Ramirez, *Footnotes*). La Llorona is also considered a variation on La Malinche: maybe all she needs is to love herself, sexually or otherwise. Of course, "conceived" offers even more ambiguity: Olivia Cruz could very well be something that the two female figures imagined together. She may even be a performance by them.

Finally, she claims parthenogenesis: "OLIVIA CRUZ sprouted fully formed from the head of Che Guevara!" (Ramirez, *Footnotes*). We have returned to the Greeks, this time stealing from the birth of Athena, Goddess of Wisdom and War. Olivia, however, interjects: "But not the head you're thinking of! Nasty!" Any intimations of virginity—of Olivia's own "virgin birth"—are thoroughly sullied; at the same time, anyone originally thinking of the head of Che Guevara's penis are compelled to put their thoughts in the realm of the intellect. Olivia Cruz is, in effect, Walter operating in the opposite direction: she turns her back on an aspirational cosmos as much as she does the aspirations of gender normativity and assimilation. That doesn't mean that she rejects her heritage, instead, she celebrates it in a disidentificatory fashion, rewriting the creation myths of her people to celebrate her in her excessive, politicized sexuality.

At the end of her introduction, Olivia is revealed as "The Supermodel of the Global Left," which is something of a portmanteau. On the one hand, it is a take on *Supermodel of the World* (1993), the album that catapulted RuPaul to stardom with its hit single, "Supermodel (You Better Work)." The album title insists that RuPaul is and must be recognized internationally for her physical attractiveness and performance of femininity, that a homophobic, racist world can and will unite behind an African-American drag queen as its standard of beauty and glamour. Nevertheless, being a "supermodel" is to be part of a fashion world that frequently plucks desirable young women from exotic locales only to use people of color and citizens of the Third World as cheap labor, and RuPaul herself has frequently reified racist and sizeist practices in drag while casting a wary eye on genderfuck drag performances that fail to fit into a normative standard of female beauty.

Less directly, it is a nod to Arundhati Roy, who, in an interview with Sonali Kolhatkar, responded to the question "But you are also a great believer in nonviolent struggle. How does one hit the empire without using a little violence, and can boycotts be effective?" with "I don't also want to go around being the Barbie Doll of nonviolent struggle" (Roy, "Superstars and Globalization"). Roy resists Kolhatkar's attempt to speak for her, to identify her belief systems without asking Roy about them. To do so, she invokes Barbie: Roy is not an immobile piece of plastic, either in her person or her beliefs, and she is unwilling to be summoned as a plea for calm by the powers that be—"What would Arundhati Roy do?"—when violent struggle becomes a necessary mode of resistance. For Roy, identifying a person with a movement leaves both the person and the

movement in a precarious position: should the person prove fallible, as all humans inevitably do, the movement is discredited by the same failure.

As the "Supermodel of the Global Left," Olivia unites Roy and RuPaul in a dance similar to that between DIY and camp in *CampCamp!*. Being the "Supermodel of the Global Left" rather than "of the World," frees the RuPaul-esque drag diva persona from the constraints of commercialism, constraints that might otherwise insist that she shave properly or lose weight. Nevertheless, by insisting upon herself as an icon—she names herself as "the embodiment of Latina *ferocidad*" (Ramirez, *Footnotes*), a variation on "fierce" that plants at least one of her feet firmly in the drag world while still offering a more radical "ferocity"—she makes a similar claim to RuPaul: that the often contentious factions of the global left, with their multifarious and sometimes contradictory goals, can unite around a queer figure of color.

Olivia Cruz is also able to elide Roy's concerns about the fallibility of political "Barbie dolls." She has already failed to conform to a number of the gender, racial, and sexual standards of globalized hegemony. She comes pre-rejected by her enemies, and revels in the means by which she fails in their eyes. Additionally, her Walter-like excessiveness reveals the impossibility of the position. Olivia Cruz claims to have been traveling to Libya to protest Gaddafi, to Wisconsin to support the labor protestors, and to have been sleeping with every major political and cultural figure in Latin America, regardless of gender or sexuality, as Olivia Cruz is, by her own admission, "all genders and sexualities" (Ramirez, *Footnotes*). This level of involvement is impossible, this level

of queerness ridiculous, this figure at once so perfectly subaltern and so perfectly fabulous that she cannot possibly exist. She is a one-woman/man/person/whatever utopia.

I call her such to intervene with Muñoz and other performance scholars who value a term that I am so nervous about. Muñoz begins *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* by saying that "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with a potentiality" (Muñoz 1). I wonder: if we are not yet queer, then just what are we? There is something that bothers me about this: in it I hear a denial of those who are queer, who put their lives at risk by performing queerness every day. Perhaps this is the same purely semantic problem I have with utopia, but I cannot let go of it, even after Muñoz assures me that "Queerness is essentially a rejection of the here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (1). I can thoroughly support the concrete possibility for another world: as I claim in *Promised Land*, I have seen it with my own eyes. Yet there is something problematic about the rejection of the here and now. Muñoz later goes on to state, "Ultimately, we must insist on a queer futurity because the present is so poisonous and insolvent" (30). It took me a while to figure out my problem with this, and it is that the "here and now" that Muñoz treats is so monolithic. It is a here and now that does not include Ida, or *CampCamp!*, or any of the other spaces that create joy and healing in the here and now. It is to perform our suffering without performing our joy, and although I stand by every argument that I have made about the perniciousness of this performance model, insisting that our privilege demands that we temper our suffering with laughter at

ourselves, on a far more personal level I have to say that to ignore joy is, for me, to give in to despair. Arundhati Roy insists that, to remain alive, we must never become accustomed to "the unspeakable violence and vulgar disparity of life," but that we must also "seek joy in the saddest places" and "pursue beauty to its lair" (Roy, "The End of Imagination"), I have to seek joy and pursue beauty in my work. I have to hear the laughter of the carnival. I have to, on occasion, rest on my laurels for a few minutes. I have to come to my art, and my activism, not just from a place of anger for all that is wrong with the world, but from a place of gratitude for all that I have been given.

It is for this reason that I made Olivia Cruz my one-woman utopia, a character who can declare herself, like Roy, "an independent, mobile republic . . . a citizen of the earth," (Roy, "The End of Imagination"). She lives in the same world that I live in, but she sees it with the same unflinching optimism that Topher brings to Gay Identities 'r' Us. Writers often talk about how characters take over; certainly, as I was writing, I didn't quite know where Olivia's credo came from, but it was words I wanted to live by: "It is a thrilling time to be alive, if you know how to live" (Ramirez, *Footnotes*). For Olivia, this involves transforming the struggle into a celebration, rushing onto every available frontline with the ingredients for salsa wrapped up on her head, leaving her hands free to pick up picket signs or ward off the National Guard (or, much more likely, distract them from the riot by pulling one or two into the alley for a quickie). She is as untenable in the present as our fractured, contradictory selves would be in a truly utopian future, but whereas a utopian vision will turn me away form the here and now, the utopian identity will turn me towards it, urge me to seek its becoming in the present. At the end of her

scene, Olivia gives birth to El Nuevo Latino, only to discover that she has given birth to El Huevo Latino, a discovery she greets with love and joy. Who knows what the egg will hatch into? One day, perhaps, we may find out. In the meantime, Olivia has a frontline to get to, and as for me, I have a show to put on.

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